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IN THE MATTER OF	:	DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S OFFICE
	:	
WENDI DWYER,	:	CHESTER COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA
Requester	:	
	:	RIGHT TO KNOW APPEAL
v.	:	
	:	FINAL DETERMINATION
WEST WHITELAND TOWNSHIP	:	
POLICE DEPARTMENT,	:	DA-RTKL-A NO. 2020-008
Respondent	:	

INTRODUCTION

On July 28, 2020, Requester filed a right-to-know request with the Respondent, pursuant to the Right to Know Law ("RTKL"), 65 P.S. § 67.101, *et seq.* On July 30, 2020, the request was denied. On August 10, 2020, Requester appealed to the Office of Open Records. On August 18, 2020, the Office of Open Records transferred the appeal to the Chester County District Attorney's Office [AP 2020-1347], which was received by email on that date.

For the reasons set forth in this Final Determination, the appeal is **DENIED** and the Respondent is not required to take any further action.

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

On July 28, 2020, Requester submitted a right-to-know request pursuant to the Right to Know Law (“RTKL”), 65 P.S. § 67.101, *et. seq.*, with the Respondent, requesting: “Our office represents Jean and Jason Reitelbach and Lance Reitelbach. We are requesting a copy of any reports and supporting documentation related to investigation of Peter Uhlman created between March 1, 2019 and the present, including any information provided by or shared with Jason, Jean or Lance Reitelbach and/or Bishop Shanahan High School. The incident number is WW-20-01122 and Detective Michael Buchmann is assigned to the matter. If you have any questions, please contact me.”

On July 30, 2020, the request was denied. The Respondent stated in part: “The West Whiteland Township Police Department has denied your request because the report is exempt from disclosure. Section 708, subsection (16) (ii,) states investigative materials, notes, correspondences, and reports related to or resulting in a criminal investigation are exempt.”

On August 10, 2020, Requester appealed to the Office of Open Records. On August 18, 2020, the Office of Open Records transferred the appeal to the Chester

County District Attorney's Office [AP 2020-1347], which was received by email on that date. The Office of Open Records stated in part:

The Department is a local law enforcement agency. The OOR does not have jurisdiction to hear appeals related to criminal investigative records held by local law enforcement agencies. See 65 P.S. § 67.503(d)(2). Instead, appeals involving records alleged to be criminal investigative records held by a local law enforcement agency are to be heard by an appeals officer designated by the local district attorney. See *id.* Accordingly, the appeal is hereby transferred to the Appeals Officer for the Chester County District Attorney's Office ("District Attorney's Office") to determine whether the records relate to a criminal investigation.¹ A copy of this final order and the appeal filed by the Requester will be sent to the Appeals Officer for the District Attorney's Office.

¹ The Commonwealth Court has noted that the OOR has the authority to transfer an appeal to "where [a requester] should have initially appealed." See Phila. Dist. Attorney's Office v. Williams, 204 A.3d 1062, *4 n.5 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2019) ("... [A]lthough the onus for appealing from an RTKL denial to the proper appeals officer is on the requester, the OOR did not violate the law or any procedure in redirecting the appeal in this case").

In the Matter of Wendi Dwyer v. West Whiteland Township Police Department, Docket No. AP-2020-1347 (footnote in original), at 1-2.

On August 18, 2020, this Appeals Officer for the Chester County District Attorney's Office gave Notice to the parties of the following:

On July 28, 2020, Requester filed a right-to-know request with the Respondent, pursuant to the Right to Know Law ("RTKL"), 65 P.S. § 67.101, *et. seq.*. On July 30, 2020, the request was denied. On August 10, 2020, Requester appealed

to the Office of Open Records. On August 18, 2020, the Office of Open Records transferred the appeal to the Chester County District Attorney's Office [AP 2020-1347], which was received by email on that date.

Unless the Requester agrees otherwise, as the appeals officer, I shall make a final determination, which shall be mailed to the Requester and the Respondent, **within 30 days of August 18, 2020, which is September 17, 2020.** 65 P.S. § 67.1101(b)(1). If a final determination is not made within 30 days, the appeal is deemed denied by operation of law. 65 P.S. § 67.1101(b)(2). Prior to issuing a final determination, a hearing may be conducted. However, a hearing is generally not needed to make a final determination. The final determination shall be a final appealable order, and shall include a written explanation of the reason for the decision. 65 P.S. § 67.1101(b)(3).

The Respondent should submit any response on or before August 28, 2020.

The Respondent should note: The Supreme Court has held that a Respondent is permitted to assert exemptions on appeal, even if the agency did not assert them when the request was originally denied. Levy v. Senate of Pennsylvania, 619 Pa. 586, 65 A.3d 361 (2013). **Merely citing exceptions to the required disclosure of public records or conclusory statements are not sufficient to justify the exemption of public records.** Office of the Governor v. Scolforo, 65 A.3d 1095, 1103 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2013).

The Requester should submit any response on or before September 4, 2020.

The Requester should note: The Commonwealth Court has held that, pursuant to 65 P.S. § 67.1101(a), the appeal shall state the grounds upon which the Requester asserts that the record is a public record and shall address any grounds stated by the agency for denying the request. **When a Requester fails to state the records sought are public, or fails to**

address an agency's grounds for denial, the appeal may be dismissed. Padgett v. Pennsylvania State Police, 73 A.3d 644 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2013); Saunders v. Department of Correction, 48 A. 3d 540 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2012); Department of Corrections v. Office of Open Records, 18 A.3d 429 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2011).

Any statements of fact must be supported by an Affidavit made under penalty of perjury by a person with actual knowledge. However, legal arguments and citation to authority do not require Affidavits. All parties must be served with a copy of any responses submitted to this appeal officer.

August 18, 2020 Letter of Chief Deputy District Attorney Nicholas J. Casenta, Jr., Appeals Officer.

On August 20, 2020, Respondent submitted a response. On September 4, 2020, Requester submitted a response. Consequently, this decision is based on the initial request, response, the OOR filings, and the responses of the parties.

LEGAL ANALYSIS

The Chester County District Attorney's Office is authorized to hear appeals relating to access to criminal investigative records in the possession of a local agency located within Chester County. 65 P.S. § 67.503(d)(2) ("The district attorney of a county shall designate one or more appeals officers to hear appeals under Chapter 11 relating to access to criminal investigative records in possession of a local agency of that county. The appeals officer designated by the district

attorney shall determine if the record requested is a criminal investigative record.”).

The West Whiteland Township Police Department (“Respondent”) is a local agency subject to the RTKL that is required to disclose public documents. 65 P.S. § 67.302. Records of a local agency are presumed “public” unless the record: (1) is exempt under 65 P.S. § 67.708(b); (2) is protected by privilege; or (3) is exempt from disclosure under any other Federal or State law or regulation or judicial order or decree. 65 P.S. § 67.305.

“Nothing in this act shall supersede or modify the public or nonpublic nature of a record or document established in Federal or State law, regulation or judicial order or decree.” 65 P.S. § 67.306.

The Respondent bears the burden of proving, by a preponderance of the evidence, that the document requested is exempt from public access. 65 P.S. § 67.708(a)(1). A preponderance of the evidence standard is the lowest evidentiary standard. The preponderance of evidence standard is defined as the greater weight of the evidence, *i.e.*, to tip a scale slightly is the criteria or requirement for preponderance of the evidence. Commonwealth v. Brown, 567 Pa. 272, 284, 786 A.2d 961, 968 (2001), *cert. denied*, 537 U.S. 1187, 123 S.Ct. 1351, 154 L.Ed.2d 1018 (2003). “A ‘preponderance of the evidence’ is defined as ‘the greater weight of the evidence ... evidence that has the most convincing force; superior

evidentiary weight that, though not sufficient to free the mind wholly from all reasonable doubt, is still sufficient to incline a fair and impartial mind to one side of the issue rather than the other....’ Black’s Law Dictionary 1301 (9th ed. 2009).” Mitchell v. Office of Open Records, 997 A.2d 1262, 1264 n.3 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2010); *See also* Commonwealth v. Williams, 532 Pa. 265, 284-286, 615 A.2d 716, 726 (1992) (preponderance of the evidence in essence is proof that something is more likely than not).

On August 20, 2020, the Respondent sent a response which stated in part:

This firm is the solicitor for the West Whiteland Township Police Department (the “Department”). Please consider this letter as the Department’s written submission in the above-referenced appeal docket.

Procedural Background

Ms. Wendi Dwyer (the “Requestor”) submitted a Right to Know Law Request dated July 28, 2020, which was received by the Department on July 28, 2020 (the “Request”, attached hereto as Exhibit “A”), in which she made the following request:

“Our office represents Jean and Jason Reitelbach and Lance Reitelbach. We are requesting a copy of any reports and supporting information related to an investigation of Peter Uhlman created between March 1, 2019 and the present, including any information provided or shared with Jason, Jean or Lance Reitelbach and/or Bishop Shanahan High School. The incident number is WW-20-0112 and Detective Michael Buchmann is assigned to the matter. If you have any questions, please contact me.”

After a review of its records, the Department identified several records responsive to the Request; a Department incident report, a Chester County Detectives incident report, and a Childline Report of Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect (the “Reports”). By letter dated July 30, 2020, Yvette Johnson, the Department’s Assistant Open Records Administrator, denied the Request in writing (the “Denial”, attached hereto as Exhibit “B”), citing to Section 708(b)(16)(ii) of the Pennsylvania Right to Know Law, 65 P.S. §67.101-3104 (the “RTKL”).

On or about August 10, 2020, the Requestor appealed the Denial (the “Appeal”, attached hereto as Exhibit “C”) to the Office of Open Records (the “OOR”). In an Amended Final Determination issued August 18, 2020, the OOR transferred jurisdiction of the appeal to the Chester County District Attorney’s Office, determining that the records at issue constitute records related to a criminal matter.

Argument

The Reports are exempt from being disclosed under Section 708(b)(16) of the RTKL, as they all constitute investigative materials, notes, and reports related to a criminal investigation. The Report is also exempt from being disclosed under the Pennsylvania Criminal History Records Information Act, 18 Pa.C.S. § 9102-9106 (“CHRIA”).

First, the Records are exempt from disclosure as records relating to a criminal investigation under Section 708(b)(16) of the RTKL, as they constitute both “complaints of potential criminal conduct other than a private criminal complaint” and “investigative materials, notes, correspondence, videos, and reports.” The investigation to which the Reports are related was a systematic inquiry and a detailed examination concerning a criminal allegation performed by the Department as part of its official duties. (See Attestation attached hereto as Exhibit “D”).

Second, the Reports do not fit the definition of a “public record” pursuant to Section 102 of the RTK.L, as a “public record” is defined, in relevant part, as a record that “**is not exempt from being disclosed under any other Federal or State law** or regulation or judicial order or decree.” (emphasis added) The Reports were assembled as a result of an inquiry and investigation into a criminal allegation. As such, the Reports constitute “investigative information” under CHRIA and are accordingly exempt from disclosure.

Requester argues in her appeal that, regardless of whether the Reports are exempt from disclosure under the law, her client Lance Reitelbach is the alleged victim of the alleged criminal activity which formed the subject of the criminal investigation and is thus entitled to the Reports. Neither the RTKL nor CHRIA carve out any exception for victims of alleged criminal activity that would grant them greater access to records than members of the general public. As such, Requester’s argument must be dismissed.

Based on the arguments set forth herein, the Department maintains that the Reports are exempt from disclosure and respectfully requests that the District Attorney’s Office deny Requestor’s appeal.

August 20, 2020 Response of Respondent (footnote omitted).

The Respondent’s response included an affidavit from Chief Lee Benson, of the West Whiteland Township Police Department. The affidavit stated:

Name of Requester: Wendi Dwyer

Records Requested: “Our office represents Jean and Jason Reitelbach and Lance Reitelbach. We are requesting a copy of any reports and supporting information related to an investigation of Peter Uhlman created between March 1, 2019 and the present, including any information provided or shared with Jason, Jean or Lance Reitelbach and/or Bishop Shanahan High School. The incident number is WW-20-01122 and

Detective Michael Buchmann is assigned to the matter. If you have any questions, please contact me.”

Appeal Caption: DA-RTKL-A No. Appeal Docket 2020-008

I, Chief Lee Benson, hereby declare, pursuant to 18 Pa.C.S. § 4904, that the following statements are true and correct based upon my personal knowledge, information, and belief:

1. I serve as the Open Records Officer for the West Whiteland Township Police Department (the “Police Department”).
2. I am responsible for responding to Right to Know Law Requests filed with the Police Department.
3. In my capacity as the Open Records Officer, I am familiar with the records of the Police Department.
4. Upon receipt of the request in the above-referred appeal, I conducted a thorough examination of files in the possession, custody, and control of the Police Department for records responsive to the request.
5. Additionally, I have inquired with relevant Police Department personnel and, if applicable, relevant third party contractors as to whether the requested records exist in their possession.
6. After conducting a good faith search of the Police Department’s files and inquiring with relevant Police Department personnel, I identified all records within the Police Department’s possession, custody or control.
7. The responsive records identified consist of a Police Department incident report, a Chester County Detectives incident report, and a Childline Report of Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect (the “Reports”).

8. The Reports were generated, collected, or assembled in furtherance of a criminal investigation performed by the Police Department and Chester County Detectives into an allegation of criminal activity.

9. The Reports contain complaints of potential criminal conduct other than a private criminal complaint.

10. The Department withheld the Reports from the Requestor because they constitute records relating to a criminal investigation, pursuant to Section 708(b)(16) of the Right to Know Law.

11. The Police Department withheld the Police Report from the Requestor because it constitutes “investigative information” under the Criminal History Records Information Act.

DATE: 08/19/2020

Chief Lee Benson
Open Records Officer
West Whiteland Township PD

Under the RTKL, an affidavit may serve as sufficient evidence to support an appeals officer’s decision. Office of Governor v. Davis, 122 A.3d 1185, 1194 (Pa.Cmwlt. 2015); Sherry v. Radnor Twp. Sch. Dist., 20 A.3d 515, 520-21 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2011); Moore v. Office of Open Records, 992 A.2d 907, 909 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2010) (affidavit suffices to establish nonexistence of records). In the absence of any evidence that a Respondent has acted in bad faith the averments in an affidavit should be accepted as true. McGowan v. Pa. Dep’t of Env’tl. Prot., 103 A.3d 374, 382-83 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2014); Office of the Governor v. Scolforo, 65 A.3d 1095, 1103 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2013).

Based on the evidence provided, the Respondent has met its burden of proof as to what documents it possesses, and that they are criminal investigative records and exempt from disclosure.

The RTKL provides that records of an agency (**relating to**) or (**resulting in**) a criminal investigation, such as investigative materials, notes, correspondence, videos, reports, and records, may be withheld as exempt. 65 P.S. § 67.708(b), titled, “Exceptions for public records”, provides in part as follows:

(b) Exceptions. -- Except as provided in subsections (c) and (d), the following are exempt from access by a requester under this act:

...

(16) A record of an agency relating to or resulting in a criminal investigation, including:

- (i) Complaints of potential criminal conduct other than a private criminal complaint.
- (ii) Investigative materials, notes, correspondence, videos and reports.
- (iii) A record that includes the identity of a confidential source or the identity of a suspect who has not been charged with an offense to whom confidentiality has been promised.
- (iv) A record that includes information made confidential by law or court order.
- (v) Victim information, including any information that would jeopardize the safety of the victim.

(vi) A record that, if disclosed, would do any of the following:

(A) Reveal the institution, progress or result of a criminal investigation, except the filing of criminal charges.

(B) Deprive a person of the right to a fair trial or an impartial adjudication.

(C) Impair the ability to locate a defendant or codefendant.

(D) Hinder an agency's ability to secure an arrest, prosecution or conviction.

(E) Endanger the life or physical safety of an individual.

This paragraph shall not apply to information contained in a police blotter as defined in 18 Pa.C.S. § 9102 (relating to definitions) and utilized or maintained by the Pennsylvania State Police, local, campus, transit or port authority police department or other law enforcement agency or in a traffic report except as provided under 75 Pa.C.S. § 3754(b)(relating to accident prevention investigations).

65 P.S. § 67.708(b).

18 Pa.C.S.A. § 9102 (relating to definitions) states in part: “**Police blotter.**’

A chronological listing of arrests, usually documented contemporaneous with the incident, which may include, but is not limited to, the name and address of the individual charged and the alleged offenses.”

18 Pa.C.S.A. § 9102 (relating to definitions) states in part: “**Investigative information.**’ Information assembled as a result of the performance of any

inquiry, formal or informal, into a criminal incident or an allegation of criminal wrongdoing and may include modus operandi information.”

In Pennsylvania State Police v. Office of Open Records, 5 A.3d 473 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2010), the *en banc* Commonwealth Court found an incident report exempt from disclosure pursuant to 65 P.S. § 67.708(b)(16). The Court held that the incident report was not a public record because the incident report was not the equivalent of a police blotter under the RTKL and the Criminal History Records Information Act (“CHRIA”).

In Pennsylvania State Police v. Grove, 640 Pa. 1, 161 A.3d 877 (2017), the Supreme Court discussed the definition of “criminal investigative records”, in part:

The RTKL requires Commonwealth agencies to provide access to public records upon request. 65 P.S. § 67.301 (“A Commonwealth agency shall provide public records in accordance with this act.”). Section 102 of the RTKL defines a “public record” as: “A record, including a financial record, of a Commonwealth or local agency that: (1) is not exempt under section 708; (2) is not exempt from being disclosed under any other Federal or State law or regulation or judicial order or decree; or (3) is not protected by a privilege.” 65 P.S. § 67.102. A “record” is further defined under the RTKL as:

Information, regardless of physical form or characteristics, that documents a transaction or activity of an agency and that is created, received or retained pursuant to law or in connection with a transaction, business or activity of the agency. The term includes a document, paper, letter, map, book, tape, photograph, film or sound recording, information stored or maintained electronically and a data-processed or image-processed document.

Id. There is no dispute that MVRs are public records of an agency as defined in the RTKL and thus subject to public disclosure unless some exemption applies. We consider whether MVRs generally, and the video portions of Trooper Vanorden and Trooper Thomas’s MVRs in this matter specifically, qualify under an enumerated exemption to disclosure described in Section 708(b)(16) of the RTKL regarding “criminal investigative records.”

...

Under the Statutory Construction Act, where the words or phrases at issue are undefined by the statute itself, we must construe the words and phrases according to their plain meaning and common usage. 1 Pa.C.S. § 1903(a). The RTKL does not define the central phrase “criminal investigation” as used in Section 708(16)(b)(ii). *The plain meaning of a “criminal investigation” clearly and obviously refers to an official inquiry into a possible crime. See, e.g.,* <https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/criminal> (last visited Jan. 17, 2017) (“*relating to crime or to the prosecution of suspects in a crime*”); <https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/investigation> (last visited Jan. 17, 2017) (“*to investigate*” is “*to observe or study by close examination and systematic inquiry,*” “*to make a systematic examination;*” or “*to conduct an official inquiry*”).

The Commonwealth Court has previously opined that material exempt from disclosure as “criminal investigative information” under the RTKL includes: statements compiled by district attorneys, forensic reports, and reports of police, including notes of interviews with victims, suspects and witnesses assembled for the specific purpose of investigation. *See, e.g., Barros v. Martin*, 92 A.3d 1243, 1250 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2014) (criminal complaint file, forensic lab reports, polygraph reports and witness statements rise to level of criminal investigative information exempt from disclosure); *Coley*, 77 A.3d at 697 (witness statements compiled by District Attorney’s office are criminal investigative records exempt from disclosure); *Pennsylvania State Police v. Office of Open Records*, 5 A.3d 473, 478–79 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2010) (incident report prepared by

police with notes of interviews of alleged victims and perpetrators assembled during investigation exempt as criminal investigative information); Mitchell v. Office of Open Records, 997 A.2d 1262, 1265–66 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2010) (record pertaining to PSP’s execution of search warrant was criminal investigation exempt from disclosure under Section 708 of the RTKL). With regard to the MVRs requested by Grove in this case, we must determine whether the video aspects generally depict a systematic inquiry or examination into a potential crime.

Grove at 24-26, 161 A.3d at 891–893 (emphasis added).

In Grove, as the RTKL does not define “criminal investigation” as used in § 708(16)(b)(ii), the Supreme Court held that the term “criminal investigation” refers to an official inquiry into a possible crime. Grove at 24-26, 161 A.3d at 891–893. In Grove, the Supreme Court agreed with the Commonwealth Court and reaffirmed that witness interviews, interrogations, testing and other investigative work, are investigative information exempt from disclosure by § 708(b)(16) of the RTKL and CHRIA. The Supreme Court also cited Commonwealth Court cases as some examples of “criminal investigative information” under the RTKL, which included, but is not limited to: (1) statements compiled by district attorneys, (2) forensic reports, (3) police reports - including notes of interviews with victims, suspects, and witnesses assembled for the specific purpose of investigation, (4) criminal complaint file, (5) lab reports, (6) polygraph reports, (7) witness statements, and

(8) records pertaining to execution of search warrant.¹

Pursuant to 65 P.S. § 67.708(b)(16), records of an agency are exempt from access by a requester if the records relate to or result in a criminal investigation. When a party seeks to challenge an agency's refusal to release information by appealing that party must address any grounds stated by the agency for denying the request. Department of Corrections v. Office of Open Records, 18 A.3d 429, 434 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2011); Padgett v. Pennsylvania State Police, 73 A.3d 644, 647-648 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2013).

In Department of Corrections v. Office of Open Records, 18 A.3d 429 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2011), the Commonwealth Court stated in part:

Consequently, we agree with DOC that when a party seeks to challenge an agency's refusal to release information by appealing to Open Records, that party must "address any grounds stated by the agency for ... denying the request." This is a typical requirement in any process that aims to provide a forum for error correction. We do not see it as a particularly onerous requirement, whether the requester has the benefit of legal counsel or is *pro se*.

¹ See also 65 P.S. § 67.708(b) (i)-(vi) [A record of an agency relating to or resulting in a criminal investigation, includes: (i) Complaints of potential criminal conduct other than a private criminal complaint; (ii) Investigative materials, notes, correspondence, videos and reports; (iii) A record that includes the identity of a confidential source or the identity of a suspect who has not been charged with an offense to whom confidentiality has been promised; (iv) A record that includes information made confidential by law or court order; (v) Victim information, including any information that would jeopardize the safety of the victim; (vi) A record that, if disclosed, would do any of the following - (A) Reveal the institution, progress or result of a criminal investigation, except the filing of criminal charges, (B) Deprive a person of the right to a fair trial or an impartial adjudication, (C) Impair the ability to locate a defendant or codefendant, (D) Hinder an agency's ability to secure an arrest, prosecution or conviction, (E) Endanger the life or physical safety of an individual.].

DOC v. OOR at 434.

As previously stated, Respondent, pursuant to 65 P.S. § 67.708(b)(16)(i)(ii), stated the requested records are exempt from access as the records relate to or result in a criminal investigation. When a party seeks to challenge an agency's refusal to release information by appealing that party must address any grounds stated by the agency for denying the request.

On August 10, 2020, Requester appealed to the Office of Open Records. The Requested stated in part: "In connection with our representation, we have requested copy of the police investigation related to Peter Uhlman. During the course of this investigation, the detective interviewed Lance. Lance is a victim of Mr. Uhlman's actions - the actions that were being investigated. As the victim, Lance has a right to be informed of the investigation."

On September 4, 2020, the Requester sent a response which stated:

This firm represents Jean, Jason, and Lance Reitelbach. Ms. Wendi Dwyer submitted a request for records on behalf of the Reitelbach family at my direction. The request was for any reports and supporting information related to an investigation of Peter Uhlman created between March 1, 2019 and the present. West Whiteland Township Police Department denied the request, as detailed in their submission dated August 20, 2020.

The Pennsylvania Crime Victims Act provides victims of crimes with a variety of rights. 18 P.S. 11.101 et seq. Specifically, a victim of a personal injury crime has the right to "submit prior comment to the prosecutor's office or juvenile probation office, as appropriate to the circumstances of the

case, on the potential reduction or dropping of any charge or changing of a plea in a criminal or delinquency proceeding.” 18 P.S. 11.201(4). Further, the prosecutor’s office is required to provide victims with an opportunity to comment prior to potential reduction or dropping of any charge. 18 P.S. 11.213(b). Without access to information from the investigation, the right to provide comments on the charges, or failure to file charges, is meaningless.

Lance Reitelbach is the victim of crimes committed by Peter Uhlman. Peter Uhlman’s actions toward Lance led to a variety of reports, including to Childline, as acknowledged by Respondent. Denying Lance, and his parents, who are also victims, access to investigative reports denies them rights due them under the Pennsylvania Crime Victims Act. 18 P.S. 11.103 (defining victim); 18 P.S. 11.201 (detailing victims’ rights).

September 4, 2020 Response of Requester.

It is important to note that a requester’s identity and motivation for making a request is not relevant, and his or her intended use for the information may not be grounds for granting or denying a request. *See* 65 P.S. § 67.301(b), 65 P.S. § 67.703. For example, although a criminal defendant may be entitled to receive certain criminal investigative records in discovery, he or she would not be entitled to receive the same criminal investigative record by a RTKL request. Moreover, civil and criminal discovery law is not relevant to RTKL requests. The rights afforded a requester under the RTKL are constrained by the presumption and exemptions contained in the law itself. *See* 65 P.S. § 67.305, 67.708. Discovery conducted in a civil or criminal case and a request made under the RTKL are

wholly separate processes. Office of the Dist. Attorney of Philadelphia v. Bagwell, 155 A.3d 1119, 1139 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2017).

Civil and criminal discovery law provides their own procedures and safeguards for the acquisition and use of potential evidence. However, once something is ruled available pursuant to a RTKL request, it is available to everyone, not just the current requesting party. Under the RTKL, the question is whether or not the requested documents are criminal investigative records. The requester and purpose for the request are irrelevant under the RTKL.

In DiMartino v. Pennsylvania State Police, 2011 WL 10841570 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2011), the Commonwealth Court, in a memorandum opinion,² stated in pertinent part:

As a final point, we note that, the requester’s status as representative of Decedent’s family has no bearing on whether the requested records are accessible through a RTKL request. We agree with the OOR that the RTKL must be construed without regard to the requester’s identity. *See, e.g.*, Section 301(b) of the RTKL, 65 P.S. § 67.301(b) (stating that an agency “may not deny a requester access to a public record due to the intended use of the public record by the requester unless otherwise provided by law”); Weaver v. Dep’t of Corr., 702 A.2d 370 (Pa. Cmwlth. 1997) (under the former Right-to-Know Act, the right to examine a public record is not based on whether the person requesting the disclosure is affected by the records or if her motives are pure in seeking them, but whether

² DiMartino v. Pennsylvania State Police, 340 C.D. 2011, 2011 WL 10841570 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2011) is an unreported panel decision of the Commonwealth Court. As such, it may be cited for its persuasive value, but not as binding precedent. *See* Section 414 of the Commonwealth Court’s Internal Operating Procedures.

any person's rights are fixed); Furin v. Pittsburgh Sch. Dist., OOR Dkt. No. AP 2010-0181, 2010 PA OORD LEXIS 212 (Pa. OOR 2010) (finding records exempt under Section 708(b) regardless of status of person requesting them); Wheelock v. Dep't of Corr., OOR Dkt. No. AP 2009-0997, 2009 PA OORD LEXIS 725 (Pa. OOR 2009) (stating the only information available under the RTKL is a "public record" available to all citizens regardless of personal status or stake in requested information).

DiMartino at *6 (footnote omitted). *See also* Mahoney v. Pennsylvania State Police, 339 C.D. 2011, 2011 WL 10841247 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2011).

In Hunsicker v. Pennsylvania State Police, 93 A.3d 911 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2014), Requester (Hunsicker) appealed a Determination of the Office of Open Records denying her request under the RTKL for access to Pennsylvania State Police records regarding an investigation surrounding her brother's death, which involved a State Trooper. In affirming the denial, the Commonwealth Court stated in part:

Requestor appealed the PSP's denial to the OOR contending that she lived with her brother for 35 years, that she was not a member of the general public but his sister, and that she should have special access to the information. The OOR denied her appeal because it failed to address agency grounds for denial of access and the appeal did not challenge the confidentiality of the records under CHRIA. This appeal followed.

On appeal, Requestor first contends that the materials she is requesting are referred to as an "incident" report, not an "investigative" report, implying that those records fall outside of the investigative exemption. An incident report normally refers to a report filed by the responding officers, not the entire investigative file, although, here, it appears that the investigative report was filed at the incident report number. In any event, no matter what is contained in an incident report,

incident reports are considered investigative materials and are covered by that exemption. Pennsylvania State Police v. Office of Open Records, 5 A.3d 473, 479 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2010), *appeal denied*, [621] Pa. [685], 76 A.3d 540 (2013).

Even if the requested records fall within the investigative exception, Requestor contends that she is entitled to those records because she has a special need for them because, as Mr. Rotkewicz's sister, she needs to know what her brother did to cause a PSP Trooper to shoot him and to investigate a possible PSP "cover up." While we are sympathetic to Requestor's desire to understand her brother's death, her status as his sister and her reasons for requesting the records do not render records that fall within the investigative exemption accessible. Under the RTKL, whether the document is accessible is based only on whether a document is a public record, and, if so, whether it falls within an exemption that allows that it not be disclosed. The status of the individual requesting the record and the reason for the request, good or bad, are irrelevant as to whether a document must be made accessible under Section 301(b). *See* 65 P.S. § 67.301(b) (stating that an agency "may not deny a requester access to a public record due to the intended use of the public record by the requester unless otherwise provided by law.").

As a corollary to this argument, Requestor contends that the investigative file should be made accessible because portions of the withheld documents are already known to her, and that if any of the record contains information that falls within an exemption to disclosure, that information should be redacted and the records then be given to her. Again, for the reasons stated above, just because she purportedly knows some of the information contained in the documents is irrelevant as to whether a document must be made accessible. Moreover, her request that the documents be redacted to the extent the records contain exempt information is based on a premise that only certain information is exempt from disclosure when, under the investigative exemption, the entire investigative report falls within the investigative exemption. 65 P.S. § 67.706(b)(16); *see also* Pennsylvania State Police.

Finally Requestor contends that the PSP Trooper who investigated the incident assured her that she would receive that information. Even assuming that the assertion is true, an individual State Trooper does not have the authority to authorize the release of documents or make PSP RTKL determinations pursuant to Section 1102, 65 P.S. § 67.1102.

Hunsicker v. Pennsylvania State Police at 913-914 (footnote omitted).

A criminal investigative record is anything that contains information assembled as a result of the performance of any inquiry, formal or informal, into a criminal incident or an allegation of criminal wrongdoing. The size, scope, or formality, of police inquiries are not relevant in determining if something is a criminal investigative record. Whether an arrest has occurred or whether a criminal investigation is ongoing or closed, are not relevant factors in determining if something is a criminal investigative record. Criminal investigative records remain exempt from disclosure under the RTKL even after the investigation is completed. Also, a record is not considered a public record if it is exempt under any other State or Federal Law, including the Criminal History Records Information Act.

The Requester specifically references the “Crime Victims Act” in response to the denial of the Respondent. The “Crime Victims Act”, 18 P.S. 11.101 *et seq*, is very specific as to the type of information a crime victim is entitled to receive, which does not include criminal investigative records. The “Crime Victims Act”

does not have any bearing on the rights and responsibilities under the Right to Know Law. Moreover, the release of the requested documents also violates CHRIA. CHRIA prohibits “investigative information” “assembled as a result of the performance of any inquiry, formal or informal, into a criminal incident” from disclosure. 18 Pa.C.S.A. § 9102. Pennsylvania State Police v. Kim, 150 A.3d 155, 160 (Pa.Cmwlth. 2016). The “Crime Victims Act” does not have any bearing on the rights and responsibilities under CHRIA.

In Barros v. Martin, 92 A.3d 1243 (Pa. Cloth. 2014), *appeal denied*, 626 Pa. 701, 97 A.3d 745 (2014), the Commonwealth Court stated in part:

Thus, if a record, on its face, relates to a criminal investigation, it is exempt under the RTKL pursuant to Section 708(b)(16)(ii). *See Coley v. Philadelphia Dist. Attorney’s Office*, 77 A.3d 694, 697 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2013); Mitchell v. Office of Open Records, 997 A.2d 1262, 1264 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2010). ***Criminal investigative records remain exempt from disclosure under the RTKL even after the investigation is completed.*** Sullivan v. City of Pittsburgh, Dep’t of Pub. Safety, 127 Pa. Cmwlth. 339, 561 A.2d 863, 865 (1989).

Also, a record is not considered a public record under Section 102 of the RTKL if it is “exempt under any other State or Federal Law,” including the CHRIA. *See Coley*, 77 A.3d at 697. Section 9106(c)(4) of the CHRIA, 18 Pa.C.S. § 9106(c)(4), provides that “investigative and treatment information shall not be disseminated to any department, agency or individual unless the department, agency or individual requesting the information is a criminal justice agency.” ***The CHRIA defines “investigative information” as “information assembled as a result of the performance of any inquiry, formal or informal, into a criminal incident or an allegation of criminal wrongdoing and may include modus***

operandi information.” Section 9102 of the CHRIA, 18 Pa.C.S. § 9102.

Thus, the records requested by Barros - *i.e.*, the criminal complaint file, forensic lab reports, any confession and record of polygraph of Quinones, the “Communication Center Incident Review,” the “Internal Police Wanted Notice,” “Reports on individual mistakenly apprehended,” and three signed witness statements - are protected from disclosure under both the RTKL and the CHRIA as records “relating to ... a criminal investigation” and “investigative information,” respectively.

Barros v. Martin at 1250 (emphasis added).

In Padgett v. Pennsylvania State Police, 73 A.3d 644 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2013),

the Commonwealth Court stated in part:

Pursuant to Section 1101(a) of the RTKL, “[t]he appeal shall state the grounds upon which the requester asserts that the record is a public record ... and shall address any grounds stated by the agency for delaying or denying the request.” 65 P.S. § 67.1101(a). When a requester fails to state the records sought are public, or fails to address an agency’s grounds for denial, the OOR properly dismisses the appeal. *See Saunders v. Dep’t of Corr.*, 48 A. 3d 540 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2012) (affirming OOR dismissal); Dep’t of Corr. v. Office of Open Records, 18 A.3d 429 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2011) (holding an appeal that fails to sufficiently specify the reasons for appeal should be dismissed rather than addressed by OOR).

In Department of Corrections, we outlined the sufficiency requirements for an appeal under Section 1101(a) of the RTKL. At a minimum, a requester’s appeal “must address any grounds stated by the agency ... for denying the request.” Dep’t of Corr., 18 A.3d at 434. We reasoned a minimally sufficient appeal is a condition precedent for OOR to consider a requester’s challenge to an agency denial.

More recently, in Saunders, we explained Section 1101(a) of the RTKL requires a requester “to state why the records did not fall under the asserted exemptions and, thus, were public records subject to access.” Id. at 543 (agency’s citation to various subsections of the RTKL, without explanation or application of exceptions, triggers requester’s burden to address exemption). Because Saunders failed to address the exemptions, we affirmed OOR’s dismissal of the appeal.

In this case, Requester did not state the records are public, or address the exemptions PSP cited in its response and verification. Requester stated merely that the RTKL exceptions do not apply without further explication. That does not satisfy the requirements of Section 1101(a) as we interpret that provision. Id.

Requester also did not address the agency’s cited exemptions pertaining to the police report. Most notably, Requester did not discuss CHRIA, which pertains to criminal records. In fact, when he explained the reason he sought the records, Requester described them as criminal investigation records.

Requester emphasized he is entitled to the records as a party involved in the criminal investigation to which his Request relates. However, a requester’s motivation for making a request is not relevant, and his intended use for the information may not be grounds for denial. *See* Section 301(b) of the RTKL, 65 P.S. § 67.301(b); Section 703 of the RTKL, 65 P.S. § 67.703. An explanation of why a requester believes an agency should disclose records to him does not satisfy the requirement in Section 1101(a) to explain why the requested records are public and available to everyone. To the contrary, Requester’s explanation underscores PSP’s criminal investigative defenses here.

We make no decision regarding Requester’s alleged entitlement to the records under an alternate legal mechanism. Entitlement does not arise under the RTKL through which citizens have a right to access public records “open to the entire public at large.” *See, e.g., Coulter v. Pa. Bd. of Prob. & Parole*, 48 A.3d

516, 519 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2012) (“home plans” of parolee requester are not accessible to her under RTKL though she is subject of records; to be accessible under the RTKL, identity of the requester is irrelevant).

Padgett at 647-648 (footnote omitted).

Where a record falls within an exemption under 67.708(b), it is not a public record as defined by the RTKL, and an agency is not required to redact the record and provide the remainder. 65 P.S. § 67.706, titled, “Redaction”, provides:

If an agency determines that a public record, legislative record or financial record contains information which is subject to access as well as information which is not subject to access, the agency’s response shall grant access to the information which is subject to access and deny access to the information which is not subject to access. If the information which is not subject to access is an integral part of the public record, legislative record or financial record and cannot be separated, the agency shall redact from the record the information which is not subject to access, and the response shall grant access to the information which is subject to access. The agency may not deny access to the record if the information which is not subject to access is able to be redacted. Information which an agency redacts in accordance with this subsection shall be deemed a denial under Chapter 9. [65 P.S. § 67.901 *et seq.*]

65 P.S. § 67.706.

In Saunders v. Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, 48 A.3d 540 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2012), the Commonwealth Court stated in part:

Petitioner’s first argument addresses the sufficiency of the Department’s denial of his request. Petitioner contends that because the Department’s denial merely parroted the statutory language he was unable to properly respond to the Department’s assertion of exemption from disclosure. Section

903 of the RTKL, 65 P.S. § 67.903, states that a denial of access shall include, inter alia, a description of the record requested and the specific reasons for the denial, including a citation of the supporting legal authority. Correspondingly, Section 1101 of the RTKL, 65 P.S. § 67.1101, requires that a party appealing a denial shall “state the grounds upon which the requester asserts that the record is a public record ... and shall address any grounds stated by the agency for ... denying the request.” See Dep’t of Corr. v. Office of Open Records, 18 A.3d 429 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2011).

The Department asserted that the requested records were exempt from disclosure under five different subsections of Section 708. Petitioner is correct in noting that the Department merely parroted the statutory language. However, the Department’s citations to the various subsections of Section 708 were sufficient to give him notice of the grounds for denial. Once the Department asserted that the requested records were exempt from disclosure under Section 708, Petitioner was required by Section 1101 to state why the records did not fall under the asserted exemptions and, thus, were public records subject to access. Petitioner failed to do so.

Petitioner’s argument that the Department was required to produce the requested records subject to redaction of the exempt information is without merit. Section 706 provides that if an agency determines that a public record contains information that is both subject to disclosure and exempt from the disclosure, the agency shall grant access and redact from the record the information which is subject to disclosure. Pursuant to Section 706, the redaction requirement only applies to records that are determined to be “public records.” A “public record” is defined in part as “a record, including a financial record, of a Commonwealth ... agency that: (1) is not exempt under section 708.” Section 102, 65 P.S. § 67.102 (emphasis added). Thus, a record that falls within one of the exemptions set forth in Section 708 does not constitute a “public record.” Dept. of Health v. Office of Open Records, 4 A.3d 803 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2010).

Saunders at 542-543 (footnote omitted).

In Heavens v. Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, 65

A.3d 1069 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2013), the Commonwealth Court stated in part:

Furthermore, under the RTKL, records that are exempt under Section 708 or privileged are not considered public records and are therefore not subject to the redaction requirement contained in Section 706, which applies only to records that are public and contain information that is not subject to access. 65 P.S. § 67.706; Saunders v. Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, 48 A.3d 540, 543 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2012).

Heavens at 1077.

The RTKL provides that records of an agency relating to or resulting in a criminal investigation may be withheld as exempt. 65 P.S. § 67.708(b). The Respondent bears the burden of proving, by a preponderance of the evidence, that the documents requested are exempt from public access. 65 P.S. § 67.708(a)(1). A criminal investigative record is anything that contains information assembled as a result of the performance of any inquiry, formal or informal, into a criminal incident or an allegation of criminal wrongdoing. 18 Pa.C.S.A. § 9102. Whether an arrest has occurred or whether a criminal investigation is ongoing or closed, are not relevant factors in determining if something is a criminal investigative record. Criminal investigative records remain exempt from disclosure under the RTKL even after the investigation is completed. There is sufficient evidence to support

the determination that the documents requested are criminal investigative records and exempt from disclosure.

Records of a local agency are presumed “public” unless the record: (1) is exempt under 65 P.S. § 67.708(b); (2) is protected by privilege; or (3) is exempt from disclosure under any other Federal or State law or regulation or judicial order or decree. 65 P.S. § 67.305. “Nothing in this act shall supersede or modify the public or nonpublic nature of a record or document established in Federal or State law, regulation or judicial order or decree.” 65 P.S. § 67.306. The release of the requested documents also violates CHRIA. CHRIA prohibits “investigative information” “assembled as a result of the performance of any inquiry, formal or informal, into a criminal incident” from disclosure. 18 Pa.C.S.A. § 9102. Pennsylvania State Police v. Kim, 150 A.3d 155, 160 (Pa.Cmwlth. 2016).

There is sufficient evidence to support the determination that the documents requested are criminal investigative records and exempt from disclosure.

CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, the appeal is **DENIED**, and the Respondent is not required to take any further action. This Final Determination is binding on all parties. Within thirty (30) days of the mailing date of this Final Determination, any party may petition for review, to the Chester County Court of Common Pleas,

pursuant to 65 P.S. § 67.1302(a). All parties must be served with a copy of the petition. The Chester County District Attorney's Office shall also be served with a copy of the petition, pursuant to 65 P.S. § 67.1303(a), for the purpose of transmitting the record to the reviewing court. See East Stroudsburg University Foundation v. Office of Open Records, 995 A.2d 496, 507 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2010).

FINAL DETERMINATION ISSUED AND MAILED ON: Sept. 9, 2020

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INDEX OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX “A” Appeal Documents Transferred from Office of Open Records.

APPENDIX “B” Aug. 18, 2020 Letter - CDDA Nicholas J. Casenta, Jr., Esquire
Appeals Officer for DA’s Office of Chester County

APPENDIX “C” August 20, 2020 Response of Respondent.

APPENDIX “D” September 4, 2020 Response of Requester.