

CVSC Announces New Manager, James McCurtis

■ By Heather Sprague

There is a lot of excitement surrounding James McCurtis, Jr. these days. As the former Public Information Officer for the Michigan Department of Community Health (MDCH), he brings a unique perspective to his new role as Manager of the Crime Victim Services Commission (CVSC). CVSC is a unit housed within MDCH that works across sectors to meet many of the needs of victims of crime.

Mr. McCurtis majored in Journalism and Communications at the University of Iowa and began his professional career as a reporter. His work with newspapers and television provided him the opportunity to witness and convey the stories of his community. Sometimes those stories were about victims and their families. Mr. McCurtis shared how this work informs his perceptions about the CVSC mission. "To arrive at the scene of a crime just as family members and loved ones arrive can be a sobering experience. These people are in complete shock and are experiencing an enormous amount of pain; I've spoken to some of these people and I know there is need."

These experiences undergird Mr. McCurtis' priorities for CVSC and are in part based on an awareness of the life-changing moment when a person is victimized and needs help. "They need to know we are here," he said in our interview. To achieve this goal, Mr. McCurtis said he plans to bring CVSC



into the spotlight. His first order of business was to ensure that each caller to the Commission is met with a human connection. There are three areas within CVSC and each handles different aspects of crime and victimization. Although employees within these groups work collaboratively, the system can be overwhelming for someone seeking services or information. At such a vulnerable point in their lives, Mr. McCurtis insists that people calling deserve to feel like someone is there to help them through an often foreign process.

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Mr. McCurtis doesn't believe in voicemail when it comes to serving victims. That is why he has charged all CVSC staff to answer all calls and to be that immediate and reassuring voice people will hear. Similarly, he would like to see movement toward increasing the amount of web-based information available and the translation of essential forms into Spanish, Chinese and Arabic.

On a broader level, Mr. McCurtis sees the value in and is eager to work on increasing community outreach, engagement, and visibility. As an MBA, Mr. McCurtis brings a global orientation, tendency towards strategic planning, and the ability to leverage technology and innovation. As the former public information officer, he used social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter to establish a more visible and contemporary presence for MDCH. He would like to continue this momentum and see CVSC create a presence through commercials, public service announcements, and print media. Mr. McCurtis believes that at the heart of access is knowing services exist. Furthermore, he sees visibility as one way to help decrease the stigma and shame some people associate with victimization. He believes the message should be clear; we are here to help.

Recently, several funding changes have taken place within the CVSC to increase the level of services available to victims and their families in Michigan. "It is unfortunate that we have crime victims, but it is very fortunate that we have funding to support victims of crime," Mr. McCurtis

said. He is excited to point out that recent legislative changes increased the maximum benefit level for victims seeking compensation from \$15,000 to \$25,000. He also highlighted that reimbursement for services such as grief counseling and crime scene clean up are now available. "There are a lot of expenses that people are not expecting to have to pay for and for some people they just don't have the means," he said. Mr. McCurtis sees parents and other loved ones as secondary victims of crime and deserving of support. In the case of homicide, family members bear an enormous responsibility for things such as funeral arrangements or crime scene clean up and often must interact with the criminal justice system, the prosecutor's office, and sometimes the media. These things are financially, physically and emotionally trying.

"It is important for the people of Michigan to know that if they need us we are here to serve them."

James
McCurtis, Jr.

Not only is Mr. McCurtis focused on engaging the public and providing services to victims, he is committed to the relationships between CVSC and their partners. He is acutely aware of Michigan's economic circumstance, but remains optimistic about CVSC's future. According to Mr. McCurtis, the infrastructure is there and it is solid. He is proud of the funded agencies and sees them fulfilling an important need.

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"Our agencies and advocates are out there working strong and pushing forward," he said. He believes that with ongoing communication and information-sharing they will continue to experience success.

Looking ahead, Mr. McCurtis's optimism, experience, and forward-thinking nature are sure to bolster CVSC's presence throughout Michigan while providing support to both crime victims and service providers in Michigan. As we closed our

conversation he said, "There is no doubt that things will progress and we will become a more visible force, it's going to take some time. We'll do a bit at a time." Mr. McCurtis remains committed to his vision for CVSC and to the ongoing dialogue between service providers and the Commission.

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