



A Conversation with Bill McCarthy

Set to retire this summer, Catholic Charities' longtime executive director discusses the agency's important and evolving work in service of those in need

After 16 years at the helm, William J. McCarthy Jr. will retire this summer as executive director of Catholic Charities of Baltimore. To say that Bill made a profoundly important mark on the largest private provider of human services in the state of Maryland is an understatement. During his eventful tenure, Bill drove Catholic Charities to meet Marylanders' most urgent needs so they all could fulfill their God-given potential.

In his final weeks with the agency, Bill agreed to sit down for a Q&A session to discuss a wide variety of topics, although we know he would have preferred to be out working with the clients and colleagues he loves so much.

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Let's start with your "why." You were building a terrific career in the private sector — both in law and finance — when you applied to take on the very challenging job of Catholic Charities' executive director, who leads more than 80 programs and nearly 2,000 employees. Why did you seek this post?

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I am a lifelong Baltimorean, and I love our community. I always tried to contribute in ways that make life better for people in our community. I felt I was able to do that as a lawyer and as a banker through volunteering, board service, fundraising and just being engaged with community associations, recreation councils, and other nonprofits. But you know, as time went on, I felt I needed a way that I knew every day with intentionality that my purpose was directly impacting and improving the lives of our neighbors and making our community stronger.

Part of that was inspired by our daughter, Erinn, who was diagnosed with osteosarcoma at the age of 11 and passed at the age of 14. She lived those three and half years with courage, grace, and purpose as she fought this horrible disease. She continued with her relationships, continued with her school and really inspired me on how she lived a life of purpose and trusted and left to the Lord to do what she couldn't do.

So I was inspired by Erinn's example, and I was determined to have greater impact on the lives of others.

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Given the size and scope of Catholic Charities and its work, did you ever have an 'uh-oh' moment, wondering if you'd gotten in over your head?

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As I was making the transition, people asked me: what is the biggest surprise or the biggest difference from being a market president of a bank? Bankers do a handful of things: make loans, take deposits, invest money, support the community. And, of course, banks have regulators.

At Catholic Charities, we operate everything from meal programs and soup kitchens to nursing homes, supportive senior housing, and behavioral health clinics. We had more regulators and were subject to more regulation and more supervision from different funders. We were funded [at the beginning of my tenure] by eight federal agencies, 12 state agencies, and six municipalities.

And we raise millions of dollars each year to support our mission of improving the lives and meeting the needs of our neighbors. So it's a heck of a lot more complex than what I was doing before. And of course, everything we do has incredible impact. ... There's also a level of risk that was quite different. So I would say the complexity of what we did was a surprise.

In retrospect, it shouldn't have been a surprise. But when you're living it in the moment, when you're thinking about it in the moment and trying to balance priorities and different things, that was certainly the biggest surprise.

Now, the other thing that I had hoped to get out of this experience – and this has exceeded my expectations – was the meaning of the work and how it fulfilled me personally, how it gave me greater purpose. Every time I visited a Head Start classroom and read to children, or visited with some of our older neighbors in one of our senior communities, or had a meal with a man at Christopher's Place or dinner at a Gallagher home with residents – all these blessed moments, engagements, and interactions really gave me energy and brought me great joy.



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To what do you attribute your successful navigation of the complexity associated with Catholic Charities' work?

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I would say a couple of things. I think I'm a continuous learner and I've learned every day in this role. I've also been humbled every day. There are things you think you know but discover that you don't. You're humbled in this way. I'm also humbled by the commitment, dedication, joy, and passion of others.

I have an intellectual curiosity about many things, our programs being one of them. I have a good memory for numbers, facts, and statistics, and I'm able to tie them to people and stories.



It drives people nuts sometimes that I go into so much detail about a program's history, purpose, and the numbers behind it. But I think having that understanding actually informs our strategic thinking about such things as what we'll do next, what's missing, what we can stop doing so we have the opportunity to do something else.

... I think as the leader, in order to honor the work of others, you need to have an understanding about the impact of the work – the purpose and how it relates to our “why” of our organization.

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What led to your intellectual curiosity and commitment to continuous learning? Do you have an inspiration or model?

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My parents clearly encouraged that, as did the Sisters of the Holy Union of the Sacred Hearts. They were really part of my early formation and education that prepared me for this. [Laughing]

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I have heard countless people comment on how your enthusiasm and energy for the work are contagious. To what do you attribute this infectious spirit?

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Wow, that's really nice to hear. ... I'm just so inspired by my colleagues. And I'm inspired by our clients. I'm in awe of what they carry and the journeys that they've been on. The impact we're having when we come together collectively is just extraordinary. The enthusiasm is really borne out of that. It's our people. It's our volunteers. It's our clients and guests. It's knowing that everyone is contributing to this movement and really moving our community forward and helping people on their path to independence and self-sufficiency.

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Catholic Charities has changed significantly during your tenure. What is your thinking about change?

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Over time what you learn is that there are always going to be changes and challenges and that the important thing is to stay focused, through it all, on our why, our purpose, our mission to improve the lives of Marylanders in need, as inspired by the Gospel mandates to love, serve and teach.

The needs of our neighbors change, and we have to be open to change. We need to be nimble. We need to honor our past, but not fall in love with our past so we are able to adapt. ... One of the hallmarks of this agency is our ability to change to meet the emerging and changing needs of people in our community. I'm very proud of how we've done that during the past 16 years. We've done it historically, and I know we'll continue to do it going forward.



Our “what” changes ... but our “why” does not change. So who would have imagined 16 years ago that we would have taken on the public health crisis of gun violence? Who would have even thought of that? Who would have thought that 16 years ago we would have so aptly responded to the opioid crisis with community access to treatment? Who would have thought 16 years ago that we would come to take over and operate the Baltimore City's largest low-barrier shelter with the belief that we could do a better job of moving people from housing insecurity ... to permanent housing, employment, and self-sufficiency? ... Who would have thought that we would have been able to expand Head Start on our quest to break generational poverty at the family and community level? And our Intergenerational Center represents a bold bet that we're going to be able to do that [break generational poverty].

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Based on your experience, it seems likely that your successor will face some challenges in the future that we can't anticipate.

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That's absolutely true. We have to be open to that, and we can't define what we're willing to do just by what we've done in the past. And we can't be comfortable. It drives people nuts, but if we become complacent and comfortable, we'll become ineffective.

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The Intergenerational Center, one of your top priorities, will open next year after many, many years of planning, strategizing, and building. Why is this initiative so important to you?

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The Intergenerational Center is in the greater Rosemont community of West Baltimore, a community that isn't far from where I grew up. [Editor's note: Bill grew up in Ten Hills]. As a kid, I would play basketball in the gym across the street from [the Intergenerational Center] at St. Edwards. The community has great history and great roots.

... Our goal as an agency should not be simply to respond to problems or social conditions. Our ultimate goal should be to eliminate those conditions and those issues. This why we expanded Head Start This is why we expanded our workforce development initiatives. This is why our meal programs are an invitation to access other services that put people on a path to independence and self-sufficiency.



The idea of the Intergenerational Center is bringing every generation in the community together with the common purpose of ... helping one another. Data shows that if we're able to work and engage and support families from the very beginning until they get older, the likelihood of breaking generational poverty improves tenfold.

So from the early learning center to the engagement of seniors, from health services, workforce development, community gathering spaces to the recreation center, as well as the coordination of these services – it's all a recipe that allows everyone in the community to participate, everyone in the community will have a role, everyone in the community will have an interest. Together we're going to not only support one another as we move forward, we're also going to make the community stronger.

I'm very excited about [the Intergenerational Center], and once we demonstrate the effectiveness of it here, it could be replicated elsewhere.

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You prioritized the expansion of Head Start. Why?

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Head Start has demonstrated success in both strengthening families and getting young children ready for school. Supporting the whole family and their growth and journey is something that's remarkably important and something I think we've done well. Head Start provides children and families with support, education, and tools to succeed, and by serving more children and families, I think we've been able to make a greater impact.

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I mistakenly thought that Head Start focused exclusively on children. But I've come to learn that this program also works to support and educate parents and caregivers.

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That's the beauty of Head Start. Children and parents learn from us; we learn from children and parents. It creates a learning community that's very supportive and produces incredible, incredible results.

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Years earlier, you led the effort to take a bold, community-wide approach in the Cherry Hill community of South Baltimore. What thoughts do you have about that initiative now?

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People have remarked: Why does Catholic Charities own a shopping center. Well, it's not just a shopping center. I view the Cherry Hill Town Center as a center of community activity. I view it as a community development initiative. Every community should have a hub, and I'm convinced that retail and local business can exist in neighborhoods. This requires doing a community needs assessment about what businesses area residents are interested in. This requires a lot of community input.

I'm very proud of what we're doing and demonstrating with the Cherry Hill Town Center. With the partnership with community, we now have more than a handful of locally owned businesses meeting the needs of the community, whether it's the barber shop, the juice bar, the laundromat. We also brought the first bank to Cherry Hill in its 75-year history. We have a community market and a new pharmacy that's locally owned. The center is supported by the community and reflects the community.

Every neighborhood should have something. It may not be retail. It may be a rec center. It may be a senior center. There's got to be a place where people can gather and feel a sense of belonging. Much like the Intergenerational Center in greater Rosemont, I believe the town center offers that to Cherry Hill.



You led Catholic Charities into to the vitally important fight against gun violence. What inspired you to do so?



It was in May of 2015, after the death of Freddie Gray. I was visiting our Head Start site on Dukeland Street, not far from where Freddie Gray died. During that visit, I learned that seven of the 50 children in our in our Head Start program had lost a father or grandfather to gun violence that school year. That obviously meant that every one of those children had suffered trauma, had suffered loss and been exposed to gun violence. I could not get that out of my mind, and I concluded that everything else we were doing in that community was all for naught if we didn't have a role in preventing [gun violence] or in contributing to changing the conditions where gun violence and death by gun was considered the norm. With that in mind, I met with my colleagues at Catholic Charities and with the Baltimore City Health Department commissioner and said: We need to do something to prevent the gun violence, because if we're not part of the solution that changes this tide nothing else we're doing is going to matter because communities will be lost.

So in March of 2016 we opened our first Safe Streets site in Sandtown-Winchester.



Whose support did you need to move forward with this initiative?



We needed the city government's support, of course, and also that of our Board of Trustees. I explained to our board that we wanted to be part of a public health solution to reduce and hopefully eliminate gun violence. The idea is to hire credible messengers — people with criminal backgrounds and street credibility — and then train, manage, and supervise them so they can help resolve conflicts and prevent conflicts in their communities.

We believed we could do it, but not everyone was comfortable with us getting into this area. But I'll tell you, I was convinced that if we were not part of this effort, the trajectory of these neighborhoods would not go in the right direction. So we raised our hand, and we did it. And in that first year we saw a dramatic reduction in shootings and death by gun. More recently, we celebrated a year without any deaths by gun in the areas in which we work.

In the early stages, we concluded that we could not operate a Safe Streets program in every neighborhood. What we could do is operate them in neighborhoods where we had an established presence, where we'd been for a long time, understood the community, and had earned trust. So we opened our second new site in Brooklyn where we already



offered other services, such as behavioral health. And then we assumed operation of two existing sites: Cherry Hill, where we've had a presence since the 1960s, and Penn North, which adjoins our Sandtown-Winchester site.

Safe Streets operates as part of a community violence reduction ecosystem. It's one part of a holistic approach to end gun violence and help communities heal and make them stronger. ... Law enforcement responds when there's been a shooting. By taking a public health approach, Safe Streets works to change the way people resolve conflict. We work to eliminate the normalization of gun violence as a solution to anything. It's a complement to what police and law enforcement do.



I know that all of Catholic Charities' programs are important to you, but Gallagher Services, which supports adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, seems to hold a special place in your heart. Why?



In the 1970s, we had the deinstitutionalization movement. Prior to that, in our imperfect path, society institutionalized people who were different, learned differently, had different needs and different capacities. The answer then was institutionalization. In 1977, Hal Smith [Catholic Charities' previous executive director] and his team started Gallagher Services by taking 13 children from Rosewood Hospital [a Maryland state institution for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities] and then over the years we created what I'll describe as a Gallagher community. We ultimately had 50 group homes where Gallagher individuals would live. We added three day programs — two vocational programs and one medical program.

The goal of deinstitutionalization wasn't to create another segregated community. We wanted to support individuals in the greater community where they choose to live, where they want to volunteer and work and go to school. The idea of the meaningful day program is opening the door to opportunities so people can achieve their greatest potential, which is our mission and vision. So, yes, I was very excited that we were able to open the Gallagher community to the broader community, much like when Rosewood sent children to Gallagher.





Will you share some thoughts about the Esperanza Center, Catholic Charities' comprehensive resource center?

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The Esperanza Center started in 1963 as a community house. The whole goal of community houses is helping people to assimilate in the community. The original program focused on English language instruction and on helping people navigate different services. Over time, as the needs of our new neighbors changed or grew, we were able to supplement our programs. For example, when I joined Catholic Charities in 2009, our immigration legal services had two lawyers, one accredited representative, and something like 1,000 cases. Over the years, that has grown. At our peak, we had 10 [staff] attorneys, roughly 100 volunteer lawyers, and approximately 2,500 cases.

The whole goal of immigration legal services was to help people affirm their status in this country. Assimilation, affirmation of status, and keeping families together really are the hallmarks of what we try to do with immigration legal services.



The other unmet need we needed to address was health care. On a remarkable visit to Pittsburgh, I ran into a sister who was running a volunteer health clinic. I was in awe because it was a volunteer clinic ... that provided free health services to the whole population. ... One of the biggest challenges for volunteer-provided health care is the issue of legal liability. They solved that challenge. ... I came back with that idea and the team kind of thought about it, looked at it, and then over time we developed our Esperanza Health Center. I'm very proud of that work ...

Another important offering is education services focused on language.

As the needs of our new neighbors have changed, we have changed to meet them. For instance, during the border crisis ... we began family reunification work. We would reunify unaccompanied minors who had presented themselves at the border with sponsors here in the United States — a family member or another sponsor. I'm very proud that we could do that work and adapt to changing needs.

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You are a reflective person. I'm curious what you're reflecting on as you approach the end of your tenure here at Catholic Charities.

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Honestly, it's been mixed. I announced my plans to retire about a year ago. For the first 10 months or so following the announcement, I didn't think about it. There was just everything else going on, as usual. But now that we're getting closer, and now that I have the great comfort of knowing that Dave Kinkopf will be taking over, I've had the opportunity to take time to reflect and think about the journey we've been on.



When you're in a position like this one, if you don't often have that ability to take a step back and reflect, then you're likely to forget about all the things you've done. During a recent meeting, a longtime colleague referred to something we did many years ago. [Laughing] He said, "oh, yeah, you did this." I'd forgotten it. Because we're always so busy, I've forgotten half of the things that were really big deals at the time. You kind of move on to the next thing.

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Do you have any suggestions for your successor, Dave Kinkopf? Like you, he's a lawyer who is now making a big transition from the private sector to one of the biggest nonprofits in the state.

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I don't have too many suggestions. But what I will say is that it's really humbling to me that a person with Dave's background and professional accomplishments was attracted to this role. It must mean that he saw something in it that was inspiring to him, that he is interested in doing. My reaction to his appointment was, "Wow, I must have done something that made it look appealing or interesting so he'd want to lead the agency going forward." I'm very happy about that and wish him the best of luck. I'm excited for the future of Catholic Charities.