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SAMHSA Director Submits Resignation

May 26, 2006

Feature Story

By Bob Curley

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Charles Curie, administrator of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) for nearly the entire span of the Bush administration, has resigned.

Curie announced to SAMHSA staff on May 25 that President Bush had accepted his resignation and that he plans to leave the agency on Aug. 5. He was appointed by Bush in November 2001.

"After 11 years in public service in Pennsylvania and now at the Federal level, [Curie] is looking to explore new challenges," said Mark Weber, director of SAMHSA's communications office. Weber said Curie is "exploring his future options," with no particular position lined up.

In his resignation letter dated May 22, Curie offered no further hint of the reasons behind his departure, rather taking the opportunity to lavish praise on the administration's New Freedom Initiative and Access to Recovery programs.

"These initiatives opened the door for our constituency groups to move the focus to achieving meaningful, real-life results for people who are striving to attain and sustain recovery, build resilience, work, learn, and participate fully in their communities," wrote Curie. "At the same time, we have firmly established that there are many pathways to recovery, including the transformative powers of faith, and have broadened alliances with community and faith-based service providers to better serve citizens seeking help and support."

Curie also noted SAMHSA's efforts to transform behavioral-health delivery systems, reductions in use of coercive interventions in treatment facilities, increased focus on co-occurring disorders, a reduction in youth illicit-drug use, and implementation of the Strategic Prevention Framework.

Alexa Eggleston, director of national policy for the Legal Action Center, said she regretted Curie's departure. "He has been a strong leader in the addiction and mental-health field, and his commitment and passion will be missed," she said.

Andrew Kessler, director of government relations for NAADAC – The Association for Addiction Professionals, gave Curie high marks for his handling of the addiction and mental-health issues surrounding events like Hurricane Katrina and the needs of troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. In the case of Katrina, he noted, Curie helped ensure that ample attention was paid to behavioral health needs when they could have been pushed aside in favor of more pressing concerns like food and shelter.

"I think he did a good job under some trying circumstances," said Kessler. "SAMHSA really stepped up under his leadership."

But Ronald Hunsicker, president of the National Association of

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Addiction Treatment Providers, called Curie's tenure "a mixed bag," saying, "My hope is that whoever is selected to replace him would be even more committed to the primary nature of addiction as a disease. Curie gave a lot of lip service, but in the end he was really aligned with mental health and really saw substance abuse as a subset of that rather than its own entity."

Prior to coming to SAMHSA, Curie served as deputy secretary for mental health and substance abuse services in the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, as director of risk-management services for Henry S. Lehr Inc., as president/CEO of the Helen H. Stevens Community Mental Health Center in Carlisle, Pa., and executive director/CEO of Sandusky Valley Center in Tiffin, Ohio.

Curie's departure would leave SAMHSA with multiple gaps in its senior leadership. The agency's deputy administrator job has been filled on an acting basis by dentist Eric Broderick since the departure of former New York mental-health commissioner James Stone. Likewise, Dennis O. Romero has been leading SAMHSA's Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP) since Beverly Watts Davis moved to the SAMHSA administrator's office as a prevention advisor to Curie in late 2005; Romero is the former deputy director of the Alcoholism Council of New York.

The deputy director's seat at CSAP also is being filled on an interim basis, by Rose Kittrell, a staffer previously involved in the agency's high-risk-youth and women's programs.

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