



Long delays in State Police crash probes are strikingly routine



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Kevin McManus lost his wife, Naomi “Betty” McManus, who was struck and killed while walking her dog in Acton.

By [Shelley Murphy](#) and [Matt Rocheleau](#)

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Shortly after 2 a.m. on July 4, 2015, a Mercury Mountaineer collided head-on with a Chicopee police cruiser near City Hall, killing the driver and injuring a police officer.

Chicopee police said it appeared the SUV had crossed into the officer’s lane, but officers called in State Police specialists to conduct an independent investigation.

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Three and a half years later, that investigation is still unfinished, and what caused the crash that killed Richard Chapin, a 37-year-old father of three, remains a mystery. The State Police unit that investigates serious car crashes hasn't provided any information about the crash to Chapin's family or local authorities.

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Chapin's widow, Susie, said she feels her husband has been forgotten by the authorities, as if his life didn't matter.

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“It kind of makes you wonder, was it not his fault and that’s the reason they’re not doing the report?” Chapin said. “They left this one behind. And I believe they left this one behind because it was an officer-involved.”

Yet extended delays in crash investigations over the past five years are strikingly routine, a Globe review of State Police records has found.

State troopers assigned to the reconstruction unit took an average of about 10 months to complete each of more than 1,900 investigations initiated from January 2014 to Jan. 23, 2019, records show. An additional 321 investigations — most involving fatalities — remain incomplete, with more than a third open for more than a year. More than 40 of those cases have been pending for more than two years. By contrast, reconstruction units in a number of other states — Rhode Island, Vermont, Maine, Virginia, and Michigan — reported a much quicker pace to resolve cases, ranging from an average of one to three months.

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The deep backlog of cases represents another black eye for an agency already reeling from a series of controversies, including an overtime fraud scandal that has led to criminal charges against 10 current and former state troopers. And the long wait for answers has caused deep frustration among victims’ families and law enforcement authorities, who rely on the crash reports to determine whether criminal charges are warranted.

“I know they are backlogged, but I would say 3½ years is unacceptable,” said Chicopee Police Chief William Jebb, who said his officers have inquired repeatedly about the status of Chapin’s case and been told it remains under investigation. “I feel we victimize people twice when we delay the process as far as the investigation goes.”

A spokesman for the State Police said it was “unsatisfactory” that the investigation is not finished. “The trooper in charge of reconstruction has been ordered to complete it immediately,” said David Procopio.

Overall, however, Procopio noted, the collision unit, known as the Collision Analysis & Reconstruction Section, or CARS, has recently made substantial progress in resolving old cases, reducing its backlog by more than 60 percent over the past 18 months .

In April, when a new commander took over the unit, there were 288 reconstruction reports considered overdue because they hadn't been completed within four months of a crash. That number had fallen to 105 by Tuesday, he said.

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“The department realized bold steps were needed to address the backlog and took several actions, including pulling three CARS troopers off the line and directing them to do nothing else but clear up their old cases,” Procopio said.

The unit has also reduced its workload by completing full accident reconstruction reports only for fatal crashes and those involving serious injuries that are expected to result in criminal charges. After investigating 472 crashes in 2016, last year the unit investigated 365, records show.

Reconstructing car crashes is a technical, time-consuming process involving math and physics and analysis of evidence and event data recordings, and it can require mapping of the scene with GPS equipment and drones, specialists say.

But the State Police unit has been chronically understaffed. It currently has 22 members and is down five troopers, Procopio said.

State Senator James Eldridge, an Acton Democrat, blamed the delays on a “lack of leadership” in the State Police and Governor Charlie Baker’s administration.

“This has been an issue for at least four years where State Police and the Baker-Polito administration could have fixed that and didn’t,” Eldridge said. “I think that shows great insensitivity toward victims and Massachusetts residents across the state.”

Eldridge said the department’s contention that it dramatically reduced its backlog in recent months was inadequate and called on Baker to devote more resources to the unit.

In a statement, Baker spokesman Brendan Moss said the governor included funding for a new State

Police class in the 2020 fiscal budget and “supports Colonel [Kerry] Gilpin as she implements wide-ranging reforms and new protocols that have led to a 60 percent reduction in the accident reconstruction backlog.”

Procopio said in an e-mail that Gilpin understands the frustration of families affected by delays in accident reconstruction and “recognizes the strong efforts of the unit’s leadership to improve case turnaround time,” but believes the unit, like the entire department, needs more troopers.

In July, Eldridge wrote Gilpin to complain about the backlog and understaffing after learning that police had yet to provide any information to the family of a friend who was fatally struck by a driver 13 months earlier.

Eldridge’s friend and mentor, Naomi “Betty” McManus, 75, a longtime advocate for affordable housing in Acton, was walking her dog on Revolutionary Drive on the morning of June 13, 2017, when a neighbor hit her with his BMW while backing out of a driveway and drove away.

A school bus carrying McManus’s three granddaughters came upon the horrific scene as emergency workers tried to save her.

For more than a year, Kevin McManus said, he seethed as police and prosecutors refused to tell him anything about the crash that killed his wife of 50 years, including whether the driver would face criminal charges.

McManus said State Police told him his wife’s case was being given top priority but later learned that nobody worked on it for months because the trooper assigned to it was on military leave.

State Police officials decided that reassigning the case would “interrupt the benefits of having continuity on the case,” according to Procopio, but in the future would “strongly consider” reassigning cases of troopers on military leave.

Finally, at the end of July, McManus said, authorities briefed him on the crash unit’s finding: Betty McManus’s death was an accident. The driver’s view was obstructed by bushes, and it was possible — as the driver had claimed — that he didn’t realize he had hit someone. Her fatal injuries were caused when she fell backward and hit her head on the ground.

McManus said he believed the report was thorough and well done but found it inexcusable that it took so long.

“I’m relieved that I don’t have to follow this for another year and a half and I can move on with the rest of my life,” he said.

Middlesex District Attorney Marian T. Ryan described the delays as a “resource issue” that leaves families and prosecutors in limbo.

“It is agonizing for families to have to wait that long,” Ryan said.

Ryan said State Police investigate the vast majority of serious crashes in Middlesex County, but that local

police chiefs have convened a group to study ways to “relieve the pressure” on the crash unit, possibly by pooling resources to fund training for local officers to investigate serious crashes throughout the county. Norfolk District Attorney Michael Morrissey said his office has sponsored crash-analysis training for local police officers since 2011 because “there are too many accidents and not enough reconstructionists.”

Some police departments have their own accident reconstruction investigators, but most rely on the State Police unit.

Norwood Deputy Police Chief Peter F. Kelly Jr. said two of the department’s officers began accident reconstruction training last year, in part because the state analysts are overworked.

“They do a great job, but they cover the whole state and they have become so busy with work that they’ve had to streamline the calls they respond to,” Kelly said.

In Chicopee, Chapin said she dreads the day when her children, now 17, 13, and 11, ask her the specifics of their father’s fatal crash.

“That has gone through my head every day, and I’m scared,” she said. “I can’t answer that honestly. When they ask me, I can only give them what I know now: nothing.”

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