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Volume Number: CXII

Virginia Military Institute, Lexington, VA, April 15, 2022

Number 13

Donation Req.: \$4.50



The Cadet Counseling Center located in the Post Hospital

Photo by VMI Staff

Does VMI Care About the Wellbeing of the Cadets? - A Cadet Investigation

- By Cadet Peyton Wiecking '23

Editor's Note: The Staff of the Cadet Newspaper Emailed the CCC multiple times requesting input for this article and to corroborate all content stated. After no response was received, an editor carried in a hand printed copy of said questions which likewise received no response. The Cadet has taken this as a refusal to comment and all information has been collected to the best ability possible.

The Virginia Military Institute (VMI) prides itself on graduating healthy, confident, and educated men and women who seek to carry out the VMI Mission. One of the cornerstones upon which VMI was founded is that every aspect of the Institute is designed to help and challenge everybody who matriculates. While some may fail to meet the challenges, VMI will never fail them. On Matriculation Day, all Rats are addressed by the Regimental Executive Officer. While their speeches are different every year, all speeches mention that while an individual might fail, VMI will never fail them. **But what happens if the VMI system fails its cadets?**

The Center for Cadet Counseling (CCC), located on the top floor of Post Hospital, serves the mental health needs of VMI cadets, Faculty, and Staff. According

to its website, the CCC's purpose is to "help cadets address personal and interpersonal concerns or stressors". Its stated goal is "to help cadets capitalize on their strengths by developing new skills and insight to better navigate concerns in the future". For clarification, the CCC assumes "cadets possess a variety of strengths, resources, and abilities when they arrive for assistance". The services they list to accomplish their mission include individual counseling, substance abuse assessments, psychological testing, resilience training, and medical leave/furlough to cadets, professors, and other Virginia Military Institute staff. There are only two licensed professionals who staff the CCC: COL Sarah Jones, the only psychologist on staff, and MAJ Trisha Fry, the only Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC). Their services are free to members of the community, but many cadet patients of the CCC question the value of what they and their fellow cadets received.

To understand where this view came from, *The Cadet* sought out current cadets, former cadets, and alumni who were willing to share their experiences with the CCC over the course of 10 months. In keeping with *The Cadet's* Editorial Policies, none of the people interviewed will be identified as they are providing intimate, personal, and

private information about themselves. Additionally, some of the current cadets interviewed fear repercussions from the CCC or Smith Hall for sharing their experiences. For the purpose of this reporting, and in keeping with *The Cadet's* editorial policy on use of unnamed sources, when personal information is revealed by a source in stories such as this, anonymity is appropriate given the nature of the school community. The information they provided for this story was collected and verified to the best of our ability in accordance with *The Cadet's* editorial policy and the standards of ethics in journalism. Subject matter experts including members of the Army Resilience Directorate, PhDs in relevant fields, medical experts, and suicide prevention specialists were consulted throughout the development of this story. Rockbridge County Sheriff's Office Records were also obtained to assist with verification.

The majority of cadets interviewed for this article who received services from the CCC, to include those who were placed on Medical Leave and Medical Furlough under General Order (GO) 61, expressed major complaints about the quality of care and lack of communication from and with the CCC staff. Some, based on care they received from outside medical services,

question if the CCC staff is capable of achieving its stated purpose.

Interviews conducted by *The Cadet* found that the CCC has earned itself a negative reputation from members of the corps who have had personal experience with their services over time. While it is advertised to the corps as a place where you cannot be judged by your BRs, cadre, COMMSTAFF, professors, and family, some strongly disagree it provides this environment. "The staff at the CCC legitimately does not care about me, my life, my success, or my wellbeing. I have had more constructive feedback from the wall next to my rack" an interviewee remarked. When asked for clarification, the cadet stated "Their advice to me for dealing with a break up was to 'not think about them' as if I already did not think of that myself". A majority of the interviewees also felt that when they talked to the CCC staff, they believed their concerns were not being addressed or, in at least one case, not listened to. One former CCC patient told *The Cadet*, "When I was at an appointment, [the counselor] looked visually bored and disinterested in talking about my issues."

During the early return period, all cadet organizations receive training from the CCC. The training instructed cadets to

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refer all rats with potential mental health issues to the CCC. Additionally, they work with the Cadet Equity Association (CEA) and Officer of the Guard Association (OGA) throughout the academic year to encourage cadets who need help to seek help. While a noble and worthwhile talking point, these organizations often do not mention that cadets are allowed to seek outside resources with the exception of Project Horizon, a domestic, dating, and sexual violence shelter. Two main selling points made by both the CCC and these cadet organizations are that the CCC is a free service and that going to the CCC does not ruin your chances of commissioning. It is true that their services are free but a number of cadets interviewed who relied on their assurance and later lost their military commissions or commissioning chances would disagree.

One of the interviewees recounted how they lost their commission as a result of being placed on involuntary medical furlough by COL Jones. "I went to the CCC because I was having a tough time dealing with personal issues. Little did I know, I would be given more personal issues in return". This cadet was referred to the CCC by a friend and just a week later, they were physically removed from VMI. The interviewee stated that the CCC placed them on medical furlough because they suspected that the cadet was "able to harm institute property, others, and themselves" in that order. While away from VMI, the cadet was given a letter from the Department of Defense Medical Examination Review Board (DoDMERB) stating that they were denied for "a history of a mood disorder and prior psychiatric hospitalization for any cause". The "history" of a mood disorder only existed during the course of half a semester. The psychiatric hospitalization was because it is the CCC's standard operating procedure to send all patients on medical furlough to a mental hospital. Neither of these events were to the cadet's ROTC by the cadet themself.

Even members of the CEA and OGA know that the CCC has many shortcomings. During Hell Week, an OGA member was told, without any specific reason, that the CCC would not accept new patients after the 5th day "unless they actually needed help". Considering the training they received, this makes no sense as their only protocol for confronting a Rat with obvious mental distress is to refer them to the CCC. Additionally, the patients referred to the CCC during Hell Week experienced long wait times where they missed critical Hell Week training. Towards the end of Hell Week, it was revealed that the CCC staff took a 3-hour lunch break and left many mentally distressed rats in the waiting room without supervision from cadre, OGA, CEA, or any medical professional.

Another CCC core service listed on their website is referrals. Some cadets who opened up about such experiences seeking these services from the CCC said that they were introduced to the CCC staff via referrals. "Honestly, I believe that they take their referral system too

seriously. I was told that a 'concerned cadet' emailed the CCC about some problems I was having and that I had to come in and talk about it. I was kept there until I told them what they wanted to hear even if I knew it wasn't the truth." In a follow up, the interviewee stated "Looking back on that day, it felt more like I was being interrogated rather than counseled"

The CCC, who wants to be known as a judgment free safe space, has threatened to use the Honor Court to prosecute cadets who they believe were not telling the truth. "They threatened to Honor Court me because I did not disclose [medical history] in my admissions physical when I refused to talk about my past to them" a different interviewee stated. "They take everything you say and try to find some way to use it against you or judge you".

Another area of concern with the CCC's treatment of cadets cited by most interviewees is their use of the medical furlough. General Order 61, published 6 June 2020, lays out the groundwork for medical leave and medical furlough. According to the CCC:

"Medical Leaves and Medical Furloughs are coordinated through the VMI Health Center. A Medical Leave or Medical Furlough is recommended when a cadet's health or mental health condition significantly impairs his or her own ability to function successfully or safely as a cadet. It is expected that the time a cadet takes away from VMI is used for treatment and recovery. The VMI Health Center provides each cadet with specific expectations for treatment while on leave or furlough."

The CCC seems to believe that any mental illness, learning disability, or "rough patch" significantly impairs a cadet's ability to function as a cadet. One cadet who was placed on medical furlough based on the recommendations of the CCC stated "I went there to get help with some depressive episodes, and I was kicked out just for using them [CCC]"

After being placed on involuntary medical furlough, many sanctions are imposed on a cadet which significantly increases mental stress on the cadet who sought help. Immediately upon starting involuntary medical furlough, they drop out of all classes with a "W", are not allowed back in barracks for any reason, and must leave VMI within a certain time frame before being arrested by Post Police.

Typically, after being placed on involuntary medical furlough and in accordance with the CCC's guidelines, a cadet's treatment begins immediately at a mental hospital regardless of the severity of the reason why a cadet was placed on medical furlough. Many interviewees who discussed their medical furlough experience said that the doctors at the mental hospitals who received the cadets strongly believed that the CCC greatly over exaggerated the cadet's condition. One of the interviewees stated that their social worker at the hospital "was upset that VMI was willing to ruin a young [cadet's] life over an easily treatable condition".

Upon leaving a mental hospital, a cadet is sent a letter detailing the

sanctions placed upon them by VMI. Most commonly occurring terms of this letter are intensive in-patient and out-patient care for multiple months, submission of a detailed log of all daily activities while on medical furlough, and a ban from all VMI owned property and events. All of these must be submitted to VMI's Threat Assessment Team (TAT).

Another significant stressor to these vulnerable cadets is an apparent lack of due process. Another cadet who endured medical furlough told *The Cadet* that they were not allowed to appeal the decision made by the TAT. In fact, the only decision that a cadet is allowed to appeal is a readmission denial made by the TAT AFTER a cadet has completed the Medical Furlough Process. General Order 61 states that:

"A cadet denied readmission by the Institute Readmission Committee has five business days from receipt of such letter to appeal this decision in writing to the Superintendent and to provide any additional documentation for consideration by the Superintendent not previously considered by the TAT or the Institute Readmission Committee. The Superintendent will notify the cadet in writing of his decision on readmission. The decision of the Superintendent is final with no further appeal."

The requirements to return to VMI are also often arduous and can further increase stress on an already vulnerable cadet. For example, while on medical furlough or leave because they were determined not to be able to cope with the pressures of academics and cadet life, a cadet is expected to either attend a different college or get a full-time job in addition to getting treatment, exercising, and complying with any additional sanctions imposed on them by the TAT if they want a chance to return to VMI.

Even if a cadet complies with all medical furlough sanctions and proves that are more than capable of returning to VMI, there is no guarantee that the cadet will be readmitted to VMI. This can have lasting adverse impacts.

In another interview a cadet remarked "The CCC ruined my life and destroyed my relationships with [VMI community members]. My family had to take on huge amounts of debt and I took out a student loan in the hopes of returning to VMI. I was encouraged to not contact BRs too. Just because I was placed on medical furlough, I am no longer able to commission or enlist in the armed forces because somehow the [ROTC] department found out. I firmly believe that the CCC told them, and I wonder if [the CCC] broke HIPAA laws".

The same cadet also commented on the communication between him and VMI "They suck at communicating. It takes multiple emails, letters, calls, whatever just to get a late response from them. On the rare occasion I got something from them, it felt like they were being super critical of my time on medical furlough, and not once did they say that they cared about how I was doing or even what I was doing."

Even upon returning to VMI, Cadets who underwent the process find that they are not respected or treated equally to other cadets. "When I returned

to VMI, I was told that I could not receive my uniforms, which they apparently threw away, because I 'was not a real Cadet' according to Auxiliary Services. The registrar was also a pain to deal with because I wasn't sure what 'class' I was upon my return." Additionally, cadets who return from medical furlough are not able to hold rank for a semester, wear academic stars for an entire academic year, and will most likely not graduate with their matriculating class.

The medical furlough process was presumably formalized in the wake of the death of Cadet Eric Alter '14. Alter was a member of the lacrosse team as well as 2nd Battalion CO who was going to commission in the Marine Corps. He frequented the CCC and in April 2014, he told the CCC that he had a gun in a truck that he could easily access, which was parked across town in the Ollie's parking lot. COL Jones ordered him to go retrieve the gun and turn it in - unsupervised. When Alter informed Jones that he would be late in returning to VMI, she got Post Police involved at 1615 on April 22, 2014. They were unable to find him or his vehicle by 1650 when they decided to call 911. The Rockbridge County Sheriff's Office assisted in the search at approximately 1715 and Alter was found by Rockbridge Deputy Travis Patterson on the banks of the Maury River in Goshen Pass. Patterson got within 10 feet of him when Alter took the gun and committed suicide. He was announced dead at 1815 - 2 hours after COL Jones ordered him to retrieve the gun. Rockbridge County Sheriff Chris Blalock "expressed disappointment that mental health authorities were not called to VMI to assist in the effort to save Alter's life".

A powerful quote that illustrates the current negative perception that arose from interviewing "VMI doesn't care if you kill yourself so long as it's not at VMI".

The experiences obtained from different cadets about their experience interaction with the CCC as well as the medical leave and medical furlough programs supports the need for an inquiry into current processes and policies to determine if the CCC is serving the best interests of its patients. The goal of this investigation should provide several suggested improvements to ensure the CCC's focus is on assisting cadets to achieve the most out of their VMI experience and not punishment for experiencing human emotions.

If you or someone you know needs mental health help, please use one of these resources below.

Psychology Today – Allows you to search for counselors based on insurance, needs, and wants. COVID-19 has allowed many counselors to use telehealth more regularly. VMI is also legally required to give you time and space (within reason) to undergo counseling.

Project Horizon – A counseling service that helps those with any type of abusive pasts. Many cadets have been allowed to go to them at discrete times and in civilian clothes.

Suicide Prevention Hotline - 1 (800) 273-8255



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