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What police, private investigations reveal about the Village Behavioral Health

By Ashley Depew ashley.depew@thedailytimes.com April 13, 2022 Publication: Daily Times, The (Maryville, TN) Page: 01 Word Count: 1241

Across 65 acres on an inside bend of the Tennessee River, a behavioral treatment center deters from facilities that gate bright light and stained tile. The Village Behavioral Health Treatment Center in Louisville admits patients into a more restrictive and treatment-induced nature camp.

Patients aged 10 to 17 reside in cabins, walk on graveled paths and participate in outdoor activities. The treatment goal is for each patient to understand his or her unhealthy behaviors and overcome them through therapeutic conversations and strong relationships with staff.

With a focus on an open environment, no restrictive barriers enclose all 65 acres. Staff are primarily responsible for maintaining the safety of each patient.

An ongoing lawsuit from a former patient against the Village and parent company Acadia Healthcare, alleges negligence by failing to properly screen, train and supervise employees.

Three former staff, the most recent of whom left last September, told The Daily Times that while they were employed by the Village, mismanagement and lack of staff accountability were at the center of several issues.

Records from the Blount County Sheriff's Office states 159 calls were initiated from Village employees between 2019 and Feb. 15. Ninety-three of those calls were for missing or runaway patients.

Twelve assaults, one sexual assault, one stolen vehicle, four vandalisms and four suicide attempts were among some of the other calls in which a patient was charged, suspected or had attempted suicide.

Village CEO Chris Shields said the facility is trying to repair its image. Shields was

promoted to CEO in October 2021, and other administration stepped into new leadership roles within the past two years as well.

“We are a residential treatment facility serving a very at-risk population,” Shields said. “Our patients come to us with challenging mental health and substance use issues. Isolated stories without any context or photos taken years ago are in no way indicative of our facility and the compassionate, expert care our staff bring to our patients every day... We have a new leadership team in place to support this mission and ensure quality of care for our patients.”

In 2017, The Daily Times published several reports leading up to a guilty plea from a former Village employee. Laken Brooke Bailey pleaded guilty to charges of sexual exploitation of a 17 year old, unlawful sexual contact and two counts of delivery of a controlled substance.

In 2018, three patients were arrested and charged with aggravated assault, theft of a vehicle and aggravated kidnapping. The boys had allegedly assaulted, bound and stole the vehicle of a female employee at the Village before wrecking the vehicle and fleeing on foot.

Civil engagement

The ongoing lawsuit was filed last November by Massey & Associates, PC regarding an alleged incident from 2019. The legal team’s investigations are focused on the Village, Acadia and former female staff member, Katrina Winstead, who was allegedly inappropriately involved with a 16-year-old patient.

“The ongoing nature of the litigation, as well as state privacy laws, prohibit me from commenting on the lawsuit directly,” Shields said. “What I can say is that Village Behavioral Health takes all allegations involving improprieties very seriously. Once apprised, we take immediate and appropriate actions to ensure the situation is addressed completely. The well-being and security of our patients and staff are paramount to us. And we have a zero-tolerance policy for any sort of inappropriate behavior.”

Winstead no longer works at the Village.

According to the lawsuit, during the three months that the former patient was admitted, one former employee, Yvonne Heston, said she knew staff members who told administration about the alleged relationship, but to her knowledge no investigations were conducted by the Village or Acadia.

The ongoing lawsuit repeated the allegation that administration never investigated comments from staff about the relationship.

Text messages from 2019 between the former patient and Winstead were included in a May 2021 notice from Massey & Associates to the Village advising a lawsuit would be filed. Winstead, who the notice states was 30 years old and married in 2019, sent messages personal and sexual in nature.

The former patient was admitted into the Village on May 30, 2019 and left at an unspecified point that July. The messages included in the notice are from July 16 until July 30.

Once the former patient left the facilities - allegedly due to worsening behavior brought on by the relationship - messages from Winstead indicated she wanted to visit him in his home state, the suit alleges.

More messages indicated Winstead knew the Department of Children's Services was coming to the Village to investigate her after the former patient's father found his son's and Winstead's messages.

One on July 16 from Winstead states, "... I'm not gonna break your heart. I almost felt like mine did when they took you, and it was so hard for (me) to hide my emotions. I almost can't believe I was able to as long as I did."

"... What I mean is be smart if you have to find a way to talk to me and don't get caught..." another message from Winstead on the same day states.

Blount County Sheriff's Office also investigated the alleged relationship, but didn't file criminal charges against Winstead.

In an email from BCSO Detective Joe McCarter to the former patient's legal team, McCarter wrote that BCSO never had possession of the former patient's messaging device but had received some snippets of his and Winstead's conversations from the investigating detective in the former patient's home state.

The investigation documents from BCSO state that McCarter conducted an interview with Winstead on Aug. 19, 2019, and she allegedly confessed to sending inappropriate messages, photos and videos but denied having a physical relationship. After McCarter spoke with Assistant District Attorney Ashley Jones Salem, he said charges weren't pursued because the ADA felt they didn't have a strong case at that time.

"The text messages and other communications between (the former patient) and Winstead should have been enough evidence that there was a grossly inappropriate relationship going on between them," the investigator for Massey & Associates told The Daily Times.

Beyond the suit

Three former employees that interviewed with The Daily Times alleged that negligence at the Village extended beyond the ongoing civil lawsuit.

Emily Parks worked at the Village from September 2019 to March 2021 as a behavioral health technician.

"It's basically just a free-for-all every day," Parks said. "There were definitely days where I went in and felt like I was going into war."

“It was really hard for me when I finally left, but I think the breaking point was I was tired of seeing kids leave there with more trauma than they had when they came in.”

Heston, who was there while Winstead was employed, worked at the Village for six and a half years as a behavioral health technician.

“We would watch the kids leave, and to be honest with you, it’d be like, ‘Okay, I wonder how long it is before they’re in a jail cell somewhere, or they’re in another program,’ because they weren’t getting better with us,” Heston said.

Another former employee, Brandon Heal, was employed at the Village from October 2019 to September 2021 as a residential supervisor.

Heal has been active on social media sharing his distaste for the facility and has interviewed with the Massey & Associates investigator. Heal received an email notice of a cease and desist order from the Village’s chief of labor and employment counsel, Casey Duhart, on March 24.

The letter states the order was issued as a warning to stop “publishing disparaging and untruthful comments about the facility, its patients and its administration and staff” or legal action could be pursued.

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