



# The Commonwealth Center for Children and Adolescents

## Placement Description

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A 48-bed inpatient psychiatric facility, operated by the VA. Dept. of Mental Health, Mental Retardation & Substance Abuse Services, serving children having emotional & behavioral disorders.

## Intern or Field Placement Responsibilities/Opportunities

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- Teaching children appropriate behaviors
- Teaching daily living skills
- Reinforcing child for appropriate behaviors
- Assisting counseling staff
- Co-facilitating creative arts activities
- Co-facilitating group activities
- Collecting data
- Attend staff meetings
- Attend in-service training seminars
- Attending psychoeducational groups

## Other Notes

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- Approximate travel time 30 minutes
- Will receive on-site supervision

## Contact Information

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**Read about students' experiences at this site below:**



*Spring 2021 - Ashley Oginz-Wilson*

The Commonwealth Center for Children and Adolescents (CCCA) is an acute care mental health facility for children and adolescents under the age of eighteen residing in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The mission of the center is to provide high quality acute psychiatric evaluation, crisis stabilization, and intensive short-term treatment that empowers children and their families to make developmentally appropriate choices and that strengthens children's hope, resilience, and self-esteem. Admissions to the facility are done on a pre-screening basis that is completed by the local community service board of the youth. The typical reasons for admission are threatened or attempted suicide, aggressive or assaultive behavior, or need for evaluation and medication management. The CCCA provides individual therapy, group therapy, family support, milieu, medication services, and education services.

My time at this site was with the expressive therapy team. Expressive therapy uses forms of expression like art, music, and dance to help patients through their difficult emotional and mental conditions. In this position I was able to do a number of things both independently and dependently. One of the things that I frequently did was help the team complete their day to day tasks. This could look like hanging up signs on the unit that show group times, dropping off supplies on the units, or organizing materials in the library and storage. I also helped to plan, prep, and facilitate the expressive therapy groups. During group time I was participating in the activities to be a positive role model, affirming positive behaviors, providing an extra set of hands when needed, assisting the patients in completing the activities, and helping to redirect inappropriate behavior. Aside from working closely with the patients, in the office I was able to help produce materials for the morale committee. This included helping with posters and morale gifts for the staff. I was also able to observe and assist in writing group session notes.

The CCCA as a field placement site offered a lot of hands on experience. If working in a fast paced, psychiatric environment is appealing, then I would greatly recommend looking into this experience. The team is great at ensuring you get out of the experience everything you want to. Being an intern at this site is also a great way to begin to understand more of the innerworkings of an inpatient mental health facility, especially one that accommodates children and adolescents. At times, the CCCA can be a very intense environment so you do have to be willing to be flexible and resilient in your work. It was new for me to have to continuously think about the materials I was planning with or handing out, because there are a lot of restrictions for safety reasons. Overall, I think that the CCCA is a great place to gain experience and learn a lot of important information that you may not ever get the opportunity to be hands on with again depending on your profession of choice.

Something important that I learned during my time at this site is that there is not one single way that a mental health journey plays out. Different background can lead to similar hardships, and similar backgrounds can lead to different hardships. There is so much diversity in this field and being at the CCCA really helped me to get a grasp on that. Moving forward, I think that this learning experience will allow me to move forward with an open perspective. I am glad to have had this experience early on, because I think that going into graduate school it will be beneficial to have the ability to recognize that individual differences play a large role in



psychiatric care. After learning and experiencing everything this semester, I still hold my same vocational goals as I did coming into the semester. Down the road I hope to achieve a doctorate and clinical psychology and work with children and adolescents in an acute care facility similar to the CCCA. Looking past that, I would like to be a professor of psychology at a university.

For my contribution project this semester, I decided to look at transitions. Transitions can be hard for anyone, but they can be especially difficult for those also struggling with mental health diagnoses. I did research on the overall affect associated with transitions, then narrowed it down to look at the affect associated with common transition that psychiatric patients experience. Looking mostly at children and adolescents, I focused on transition from inpatient to the community, to education, and to other facilities. I also was curious to learn more about what it is like moving from adolescent mental health services, to adult mental health services. As a result of the research, I brainstormed an idea for an expressive art group in which the participants have the opportunity to use art to show how they are feeling about being in the current facility, as well as how they are feeling about their next placement. Also based on the research, I think that it would be beneficial to provide staff with resources to help ease small transitions like shift changes and moving from room to room. This was not something I had time to look into during my time at the CCCA, but I would be interested to know if that is something that would be helpful down the road.

I would recommend this site to anyone that is curious about. The expressive therapy team is very supportive and willing to work with you on all things schedule and time related. Everyone on the team wants to foster a learning environment, and they are all as welcoming as possible. If you are worried about the intensity of the site, I will say that everyone does a great job at debriefing and ensuring that you are feeling okay throughout the experience. This is especially a great site if you are at all curious about expressive therapies. I knew very little about this modality at the beginning of the semester and have found that the hands-on approach was the best way to see all of the benefits that expressive therapy has to offer. If you want to have the chance to make a difference in someone's life, no matter how big or small, this is a great site to pursue for your field placement experience.

### ***Spring 2021 - Rachel Hughes***

This semester I have had the opportunity of interning with the expressive therapy department at the Commonwealth Center for Children and Adolescents (CCCA). The mission of the CCCA is to provide clients high quality psychiatric care, crisis stabilization, and short-term treatment for individuals under 18-years-old who reside in the commonwealth of Virginia. The individuals admitted into the CCCA are there for numerous reasons such as threatened or attempted suicide, aggressive or assaultive behavior, or need for psychiatric evaluation and medication management. Because of the diverse nature of the clients at the CCCA, there are a multitude of different services provided. The clients all have the opportunity to engage in individual and group therapy sessions, medication treatment if needed, familial support, and milieu and social activities. For additional support, each client has a social worker, a doctor, and



a clinical psychologist they work with during their admission. The CCCA also has a school in the building for the clients to continue to engage in their education during admission.

As previously mentioned, I was able to work with the expressive therapy (ET) department throughout the semester. This team is made up of six people including my supervisor, Trudi Goodwin, a peer support specialist, an art therapist, a recreation therapist, and two additional staff. All of these individuals have specific strengths that work well together. I was able to observe the benefits of working as a team in a high stress environment and saw the importance of caring for one another. A typical day at the CCCA usually began with a verbal debrief on new clients and a discussion about what to expect for the day. This included a breakdown of what was happening during groups, different tasks available for me to accomplish in any downtime between groups, and discuss general information about clients. Following this, I would join some of the team in checking on the units for any activities needed and place group time signs on the unit. I also had the chance to join the team during Dialectical Behavior therapy (DBT) groups. This group is more clinically structured than that of the expressive therapy groups and focuses on the modules of emotional regulation, mindfulness, interpersonal effectiveness, and distress tolerance. Later in the day, I was able to co-facilitate expressive therapy groups which included dance therapy, making crafts, playing recreational games, playing card games, and working with sensory activities. The clients at the CCCA always looked forward to these groups and were very interested in what activities were planned for the day. It was always encouraging when the clients were excited to participate in group. The team also gave me the opportunity to lead a group. This was helpful for my own development as a future counselor. Additionally, I was able to observe and give an intake assessment with supervision. The intake assessment for expressive therapy includes asking questions about activities the client finds enjoyable, talking through existing coping skills and goals, and asking what situations could act as a trigger to the client. This information helps the ET team create groups that will be both beneficial and enjoyable for the clients.

As for advantages for working at the CCCA, the team of expressive therapists is at the top of the list. There was not a moment that I did not feel supported and encouraged during the semester. I was given many opportunities to learn and be taught new information that shaped me into a better future counselor. Another advantage of this site is the clinical diversity. I was able to experience a variety of clients with different mental impairments and had hands on experience through therapy groups. I was able to see both the benefits and drawbacks of the mix of clinical diagnoses in group settings and lean into these challenges. The biggest disadvantage with working at the CCCA is related to the nature of working in a psychiatric hospital. The environment can be heavy and stressful, but this is to be expected. It is essential for one to develop boundaries with the material and know when to ask for help. Support is there when you need it, but one must have a priority for their own mental wellness when going into this environment on a daily basis. There are some days where I was exposed to heavy personal back stories and witnessed violence, but I had a support system that lifted me up and reminded me the “why” of this experience.

This being said, I learned numerous things from my experience at the CCCA. Though co-facilitating therapy, I learned to have patience during therapy and notice the small victories. On



multiple occasions the highlight of my day was seeing a client actively engage in group in a way they were unable to before. This could be as simple as sitting at the table with his/ her peers without disrupting the therapy session. I also learned the necessity of self-care. I found that when I was feeling burnt out, I was not able to care for the clients as well as I was capable. Many times, the solution was reflecting on my own needs. This is something I will take with me into graduate school and in the working field. Lastly, I learned practical information about reframing questions and verbal de-escalation. When clients felt agitated or anxious, it is important to meet them where they are and ask clarifying questions. This is something I learned in a classroom but was able to practice at the CCCA.

Lastly, I focused my contribution project on providing a mindfulness resource for staff on the units to use after a stressful or intense incident. There were a number of occasions where the staff at the CCCA had to restrain a client for being aggressive after an attempt at verbal de-escalation. This can result in injury and trauma. I wanted to provide an accessible resource for these individuals to use after such moments. I created a “mindfulness crash course” which was a business card that included factual information of the benefits of mindfulness, examples of how to be mindful, and advocacy organizations. The front of the card also included a mnemonic device of steps to take to ask for time to practice mindfulness. The hope is that this project will decrease symptoms of burnout and increase mental wellness in psychiatric staff.

Overall, I highly enjoyed my experience at the CCCA. I was able to work within a psychiatric setting which is an experience I will value going into graduate school. I feel better prepared for my future because of my time working with and being supported by the ET staff. I recommend you apply to this site if you are thinking about going into a field close to clinical psychology.

### ***Fall 2020 – Juhi Patel***

This past semester, I had the opportunity of interning with the expressive therapy department at the Commonwealth Center for Children and Adolescents, or the CCCA. The CCCA is an inpatient mental health facility in Staunton, VA, and their mission is to provide high quality acute-psychiatric care to individuals under 18-years old. Individuals are admitted for a variety of reasons including for a severe mental illness, intellectual disability, substance abuse, or under a temporary detention order from a juvenile detention center. The staff members at this facility work to provide interventions for these individuals such as expressive therapy sessions, medication, and social work services to instill hope and a better outlook upon returning to their community. Given the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions during this semester, the CCCA still accommodated me as an intern, and they took several precautions to ensure the safety of the patients and staff.

I had various opportunities during my time at the CCCA. On a typical day, I would spend the first half of the day organizing materials for the group therapy activities and helping the expressive therapy (ET) staff put together posters or items for the staff. Later in the day, I would



go to each of the four units to drop off any individual activities that the patients would ask for like coloring pages or games, and then we would return to each unit for expressive therapy group times. During group times, each of the ET staff members would travel to the units with a different planned activity, and I would accompany one of them. Group activities included things like making slime, playing a physical game, board games, or making other crafts. These activities mainly aimed to build skills in one or more areas that would be therapeutic for patients such as building fine or gross motor skills, expressing emotions through creative outlets, or working on interpersonal skills. This time of the day was usually the patients' favorite, and it was always nice to see their faces light up when the ET staff would come to do group with them. I would also accompany ET staff to do recreational therapy assessments when new patients were admitted, and I had the opportunity to conduct some of them on my own under the supervision of the staff. Assessments required interviewing the patients about their favorite activities and how to redirect them when they felt stressed. During my free time in between group therapy activities, I also has the opportunity to read patient files to understand their past history and formal diagnoses.

One of the main advantages of interning at this site was working with the expressive therapy team. Each member on this staff was extremely welcoming to the interns, and they were passionate about their work. I really enjoyed working with this team because they truly care about the well-being of each of the patients, and they always went above and beyond to make sure that patients felt supported. Another advantage of being at the CCCA was getting a full clinical experience from this site. Being at this facility allowed me to have a full experience of what it is like to work in a mental health facility. Although the patients do not receive typical psychotherapy sessions, I still felt like I was getting a nice experience through learning about expressive therapy. One disadvantage of this site was that it was difficult to build an emotional tolerance to the heavy material that I was exposed to through working with this population. Many of the patients can be aggressive or self-harming, and I was regularly exposed to these behaviors as well as a lot of other emotionally taxing situations. Working here requires a lot of patience and the ability to separate your personal emotions from your work, and this was something that I had to really work on to protect my own mental health. The only other limitation that I found was that it was a far commute for me to drive to Staunton, so I was only able to go a couple of days per week for the entire day.

I think that I learned a lot through my experience with the CCCA. I chose this site because I want to become a therapist in the future. The CCCA gave me a nice experience with working with a population that I am interested in, and also getting to understand how group therapy works. I realized through this internship that I really enjoy doing group therapy, and it has become something that I will consider implementing into my future practice. Group therapy serves as a valuable way to help individuals socialize and understand how their problems relate to other peoples', which is especially useful for younger children and teens. Many of the skills I learned came from watching how the other expressive therapy staff members interacted with the



patients. I often got to observe the ET staff members be very patient and empathetic with other patients; they would always give the patients time to speak and process their emotions whenever they were upset. Watching them do this was really valuable because I could see that the patients truly appreciated being comforted in this way, and it would often noticeably improve their behaviors. I learned that it is important to individually understand each patient you work with, and that it is always worth putting in the extra effort as a professional to make sure that they feel supported.

Overall, I had a very positive experience at the CCCA. Expressive therapy was something that I did not have a lot of knowledge about prior to this internship, and learning about it and how it can help a younger population was really beneficial. This experience supported my ambition of becoming a therapist, and taught me new ideas that could be used in my practice. I also learned a lot more about the various professionals that are a part of a psychiatric care facility such as art therapists, clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, nurses, and social workers. I really appreciated the team that I got to work with this semester, and I always felt very supported by them and my supervisor. I think that this internship provided me with a lot of confidence for going into the next step of my career. I now know that I really enjoy group therapy and expressive therapy, and that these methods work very well for children and adolescents. I look forward to seeing how what I learned at this site will incorporate into my future in graduate school and in practice as a therapist.

### ***Fall 2020 – Eliza MacKnight***

This semester I was given the opportunity to intern at The Collins Center and Child Advocacy Center. Their mission is to eliminate sexual violence and its impact within the Harrisonburg community and surrounding areas; in order to do this, they offer services such as trauma-informed therapy, prevention and outreach programs, sexual assault crisis services and victim advocacy. Through their child advocacy center, they conduct forensic interviews and work cohesively with local police departments and Child Protective Services. They also conduct courtesy visits for clients from surrounding areas such as Page and Rockingham counties.

Throughout my semester at The Collins Center, my experience was overwhelmingly positive. Despite limitations that were put into effect due to Covid-19, the staff at The Collins Center ensured to the best of their ability that I still had a beneficial learning experience that allowed me to grow professionally and gain insight into how non-profit organizations operate and what type of services they provide for the community. Each week I spent ten hours total at the center, splitting my time evenly between Tuesdays and Thursdays; on Mondays I attended crisis meetings over Zoom in which the staff debriefed one another on any crisis hotline calls that came in throughout the week and any forensic interviews that had been conducted. My duties varied from day to day depending on staff needs and any projects that were happening at the time, but many of my responsibilities remained the same throughout the semester. I often



organized and updated client files with therapy progress notes and insurance forms, made copies and scans of documents, conducted client satisfaction surveys, and answered the phone. I was also sometimes asked to sit with younger clients in the waiting room before their forensic interview while their parents were debriefed, to keep them comfortable and entertained. Most therapy sessions had to be moved online to telehealth platforms so there was often no one in the center besides the staff, but I enjoyed getting the opportunity to read about clients' progress through their files, as I was able to see firsthand how much they benefitted from working with the therapists at the center.

Getting to observe forensic interviews was one of my favorite experiences while interning at this site. I feel as though they provided me with so much insight into how child advocacy centers operate, and the interviewers at the center are so skilled in their field of work. Because there was a capacity limit in the observation room, I wasn't able to observe interviews if there were too many people already in the room; there is usually an advocate, police officer and Child Protective Services representative present, so I was only able to watch a few by the end of the semester. However, I learned a lot from the interviews I was able to sit in on; my supervisor also allowed me to watch old interviews of clients whose files I had read through so I was lucky in that I still was able to have this experience, even if it wasn't in real time. Beyond this, there were a few times I was able to help with projects the center was participating in, which I really enjoyed having the opportunity to contribute to. Throughout the semester I went shopping to put together a gift basket for the SANE (Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner) nurses working nearby at Sentara, and helped gather items and assemble Hope Bags, small bags containing bath towels, snacks and toiletries to be given to trafficking victims when they're rescued. These projects were both fun to complete and very rewarding; I really valued and was inspired by how much The Collins Center strives to involve themselves in this type of work.

This semester, as at every field placement site, there were limitations due to Covid-19 and the restrictions that had to be placed. However, I don't feel as though this took anything away from my time at The Collins Center. Only half of the staff usually was able to be in the office each day, so unfortunately, I was not able to spend much time with the other half of the staff, but I really value the relationships and conversations I was able to have with those who were there on my days. In my opinion, the biggest advantage of this site is the staff and the positive energy they exude. I immediately felt so welcomed and comfortable with each of them, and I can tell they value each other and their work so deeply. They are such a tight knit group, and I feel so thankful to have been able to spend a semester working with them. They each made an effort to speak to me about my own life and goals, and answered any questions I had about the work they did or the clients they served. While what a typical intern's experience might look like was altered slightly, it has still taught me so much about becoming a professional in the mental health field, especially during a pandemic, in which many more individuals need access to these services. One disadvantage to this site is the material that is handled; it can be heavy and disheartening, and I found at times it was difficult to separate myself from the information and stories I heard there. Emotional separation is an important skill to have when entering into this field, so I am grateful to have learned it early on; however, I am a very sensitive person so I did find it hard not to let it get to me.



I think my largest learning opportunity came from getting to see how the therapists and advocates at this site worked with both adult and adolescent clients. One of my main goals for this experience was to solidify my future goals, specifically what kind of population and age group I want to work with. Because The Collins Center is a non-profit organization, they help a diverse population of clients that represent different races, ages, socioeconomic groups, ethnicities, among many others. One of my favorite aspects of this site is that they serve individuals who otherwise might not be able to access services they need because of financial or geographic limitations. Their mission has inspired me to want to work professionally in this same capacity with trauma victims. Through this same lens, I have also learned that working with children in a trauma-based setting, for now at least, might be too challenging for me emotionally. For this reason, I think working with adults is a future career choice that will fit better with my own professional and emotional strengths.

For my contribution project, I chose to look deeper into the concept of embodiment yoga and breath work, and how this could be implemented into therapy work with trauma victims. The goal of this was to provide the therapists at The Collins Center with more interactive methods they could use to help their clients tune back into both physical and mental awareness in a way that maintains minimal levels of hyperarousal and other anxiety or depressive symptoms. To illustrate the research I found, I videoed myself instructing a yogic practice that combined meditative breathing techniques, a gentle yoga flow, and mindfulness to demonstrate different embodiment paths they could take with their clients depending on their comfort level and therapeutic progress.

As a result of my internship at The Collins Center, I have further solidified my professional goals of becoming a trauma-informed therapist. Had I not had this opportunity or the support from the staff at this site, I don't think I would be as confident in the next steps I have decided to take after graduation next semester. I am so grateful for everyone at The Collins Center for allowing me to learn from them and showing me so much strength and resilience in the work they do for the community. I hope one day I will be able to make as positive an impact in people's lives as they have made in both their clients' and mine.

### ***Fall 2020 – Jacqueline Duchemin***

This semester, I was able to be an intern at the Commonwealth Center for Children and Adolescents. The CCCA is an acute psychiatric care facility for children located in Staunton, Virginia. They provide services to those under 18 years old with severe psychological disorders and intellectual disability who can't be served by any other child psychiatric facilities in the state for a number of reasons such as being a danger to themselves or others. The kids at the center are typically experiencing severe problems such as suicidal ideation and attempts, aggressive and assaultive behavior, substance abuse. They provide intensive, short-term treatment aimed at promoting the development of behavioral skills as well as medication and case management in order to prepare the children for their next steps, wherever those may be. The facility has 4, 12 bed units that are typically organized by age. As a result of COVID, however, the facility is organized in terms of new intakes and patients who have stayed in the facility longer. This has to



do with keeping new patients separate from more long-term patients until they have been confirmed negative for COVID. The facility offers an in-center school program that allows them to keep pace with the school they attend, expressive therapy groups, and individualized case and medication management.

I worked under the Expressive Therapy department this semester, which is made up of 6 people. There is a supervisor, peer specialist, art therapist, recreational therapist, and 2 additional staff. My days at the center were from 11 in the morning until 7 at night, which is the hours that the ET staff worked. I spent nearly all of my time with these staff members, observing and helping them with tasks to make their jobs easier and give me exposure to the different environments within the center.

At the beginning of most days, I would look over patient charts and documents to gain insight into the new intakes and discharges from the previous week. This allowed me to learn about the different conditions of children in the center, as well as finding out any information that might be beneficial to me when interacting these kids, such as a history of violence or things that might potentially upset them. Something else that I would do early in the day was prepare supplies for groups or anything else the staff might need. This involved a lot of craft preparation or looking through supplies to identify potentially hazardous materials. The ET staff were also in charge of boosting staff morale to improve staff retention rates and prevent burnout, so I often assisted them in putting together items for this or helping create and hang posters. Another task was the observation of recreational assessments. These assessments are given each time a new patient comes to the center to find out which recreational therapy activities, materials, and groups might be beneficial to an individual while they are receiving treatment, as well as identifying personal strengths, stressors, and treatment goals. The main daily task I participated in was observing and co-facilitating expressive therapy groups. These could be centered around art, music, dance, sports, games, or a number of other activities. Each of the four units had at least one group per day with different ET staff. The staff typically split up which units they would take, so I was not able to attend each group as they overlapped. These groups took up a majority of the day.

As far as advantages of choosing this site, there are numerous. One of the best things about my experience was the team of staff I worked with. The ET department was incredibly supportive of my personal goals and allowed me to get what I wanted out of my time there by participating in and planning activities that I was interested in. I was allowed to pick times to come in that worked with my schedule, and was even allowed to work on days when another intern was in the office as there was plenty to keep us busy. Not only were they supportive, but they were incredibly nice and made my time there so much fun. Although I didn't spend a lot of time with my supervisor, Trudi Goodwin, she offered endless support and encouragement, and I knew that she would help me with any problem that might come up. Another advantage to this site was the experience with the children at the center. This site allowed for so much exposure to children of many backgrounds experiencing a plethora of psychological disorders and behavioral difficulties. Through examination of patient records and documents, I was able to gain so much insight into these disorders and how they might manifest in different patients, as well as learning



how to respond to certain behaviors that may come with them. I also received my CPR and First Aid certification through an on-site training day.

As far as disadvantages, I would say that most came from the handling of COVID. For those who must be very careful with their health or who are uncomfortable being put in situations where COVID infection is a possibility, I would advise caution with this site. I was unable to attend my site for several weeks at the beginning of the semester due to an outbreak, and the threat of another shutdown continued throughout the semester. This likelihood was caused by the direct contact with children and many staff throughout the day. The ET staff share a tiny office, and must be present on all units regardless of whether or not the children are new intakes. I was also only tested 2 times, once before my placement and another time at my request because of an outbreak, while other staff were tested almost weekly. Another possible disadvantage has to do with the serious nature of the placement. There are many situations that could possibly lead to some discomfort having to do with inappropriate or sometimes violent behavior by patients, emotional information about patient backgrounds, and other events that might take place. A particular example of this to be aware of has to do with the center's use of restraint chairs in dealing with dangerous behaviors of patients. This can be difficult to observe, and is an already controversial topic.

My contribution project had to do with the creation of a group for the children to write letters to other children receiving treatment for terminal illness across the country. The activity aimed to promote empathy and perspective taking while also providing an engaging activity to encourage participation. The activity also encouraged staff to participate, which modeled appropriate engagement while also promoting positive relationships between patients and staff. For this I created detailed instructions for staff and children, and created examples for participants to get inspiration from. I was able to facilitate this group by myself with the presence of another member of the ET staff present.

This placement provided me with valuable experience working with children and with a variety of psychological disorders. It inspired an interest in expressive therapy, which I now intend to pursue. I couldn't have asked for a better field placement experience, and would recommend the CCCA to everyone.

### ***Spring 2020 – Lindsay Allen***

The mission of the Commonwealth Center for Children and Adolescents (CCCA) is to provide the highest possible quality psychiatric diagnosis, evaluation, and treatment services to children and adolescents. The Center serves as the only state run acute child psychiatric hospital and takes in children that private facilities in the state will not. These children are typically too violent and cannot afford to pay for a stay in a private child psychiatric hospital. The facility provides children that are in crisis with clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors, expressive therapists, and social workers to work with. Patients are individually assessed and given plans of action for treatment.



My experience at CCCA was with the expressive therapy office. During my time spent there, I had the opportunity to facilitate group therapy sessions. My responsibilities during these sessions included preparing and distributing materials, explaining the activity, and helping patients one on one when requested. For example, during one session we had the patients make shaving cream art. I set up color dyes on the tables, distributed a tray of shaving cream to each patient, taught them what to do with a demonstration, and helped the patients that requested my help - especially in the younger units. Between groups, I also helped to clean things up and replenish supplies for the next group of patients. In addition to facilitating group therapy sessions, I was also tasked with helping to fill in progress reports for each patient that came to group therapy for the day. This included things like how long they attended the session, their level of participation (i.e., watched, participated), their general mood, any behavior that was out of character, and their progress compared to prior sessions. Other opportunities included reading new-patient assessments and attending unit rounds. New-patient assessments included the chief complaint, patient history of psychiatric hospital stays, current and past medications, family history of diagnoses and medications, histories of addictions, criminal history, etc. Rounds provided me the opportunity to see the resident psychologist, psychiatrist, counselor, and social worker talk about these new-patient intake assessments and what they would be able to do in order to foster healing in a particular patient.

My impressions of this site were that this facility is absolutely vital to our population of youth in Virginia experiencing mental illness. If it were not for this facility, many would go without the treatment that they require. An advantage for the Center is that they have so many different perspectives on the different issues faced by the patients, so patients are provided with the best possible appraisal of their situation, and therefore the best possible course of treatment. These different perspectives include the opinions of psychologists, psychiatrists, expressive therapists, counselors, and social workers. The educational background and priorities of the individuals in these positions differ, which provides a more robust plan for patient recovery. If this were not the case and say the program left social work out of the equation, many patients would have nowhere to go upon discharge. A disadvantage that the center faces, however, is disorganization and a lack of harmony among the staff. Workers tend to have trouble finding things when they need them because there is no organizational method, so things find a new home each time they are used. There is also a lack of structure in procedure with each staff member doing things how they see fit. This is a fast paced environment, so maintaining structure is not easy to do when there was hardly a structure in place to begin with. This matters, however, because it does have a visible effect on the patients.

The best thing about working in this facility was building meaningful relationships with patients. It was amazing to see the progress made throughout their time at the Center and to see



what small part I had in their recovery. Building rapport with patients to the point that they feel comfortable talking about their feelings, why they are there, and their fears about leaving is an incredible feeling. Speaking from personal experience it feels like such a weight off a person's shoulders to have someone know what is going on in their life. To be able to do this for patients at CCCA was very fulfilling. I also thoroughly enjoyed working with the staff in the expressive therapy offices and learning about what they do. It is very inspiring and noble work. The one thing that I did not like working at the center was the possibility of getting seriously injured. I have seen what it is like for the staff members to have to call a code because of a violent patient and it is extremely anxiety driving. When this happens, the patient will do anything and everything they can to harm you. In class I spoke about the similarities between the patients at the Center and my youngest brother, who would do the same when he was having an episode. This brought up some unwanted memories for me and did give me anxiety, but not to the point that I could not cope fortunately. This aside, I was well suited for this placement and did a good job of managing stress.

One thing I learned while working at my site was that there is no follow up on patients. Once they are released from the center, you have no idea what happened to them. To me this was difficult to hear, as some of the patients you work with really stick with you and cause you to want to know that they were able to go off and be successful and happy. I understand why this is not possible and for the purpose of not internalizing things, it is probably for the best. This did not change my desire to become a clinical neuropsychologist, though I too will be working with children and will still wish I knew what happened to them after they left my care. If anything, the experience affirmed that I will do well as a clinical neuropsychologist. Working at the Center showed me that I can do extremely well working with children - meeting them at their level, helping them to manage their feelings, and providing a positive perspective to their situation. I am so thankful for this experience. It has given me the drive I need to push through my masters program at George Mason University and eventually my Ph.D. program, hopefully also at George Mason University.

### ***Spring 2020 – Anne Berling***

The Commonwealth Center for Children and Adolescents (CCCA) is an acute-care psychiatric inpatient facility for individuals under the age of 18. It is located in Staunton, VA and is the only publicly funded acute children's psychiatric hospital in the state. The Commonwealth Center is operated by the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services. The mission of CCCA is to provide high quality acute psychiatric evaluation, crisis stabilization, and intensive short-term treatment to children. Their goal is to empower children



and their families to make developmentally appropriate choices and strengthen children's hope, resilience, and self-esteem. CCCA strongly values treating their patients with dignity and respect as well as providing a continuum of care that includes the safety net of public acute inpatient services. A child is prescreened before being admitted into the facility and a prescreener from the home community service board needs to determine that the child is in danger. Typical circumstances that require psychiatric treatment include, but are not limited to, the following: threatened/attempted suicide, presents aggressive/assaultive behavior, and is in need of evaluation and medication management. CCCA provides a safe and modern environment for their patients with four 12-bed units (48 beds total). The single-story building allows for a therapeutic environment that fosters normal growth and development for each patient

Throughout their stay at CCCA, patients are offered an array of services. I spent most of my time interning with the Expressive Therapy team. Expressive therapy groups focused on coping skills and self-expression through a variety of projects done in a group setting. However, aside from expressive therapy, CCCA provides the patients with an adequate educational program to help prevent patients from falling behind in their studies as well as a recreational space where they are allowed to play games such as basketball. The Commonwealth Center has a multidisciplinary team of child psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, nurses, social workers, activity therapists, teachers, and behaviorally trained direct care staff to provide treatment to the patients. The combination of all personnel at the facility supply the patients with a wide range of individual, group, family, and medication modalities for stabilization. Yet, due to the high volume of admissions combined with a short length of stay (typically less than 7-10 days), the need for active and effective bed management increases.

When I started at CCCA I spent my first few weeks simply observing what the expressive therapy team was all about. I had the ability to participate in DBT groups. DBT is dialectical behavior therapy, a form of cognitive therapy that provides the patients with management skills to help with painful emotions and decrease conflict in relationships. DBT groups would focus on activities that promoted mindfulness, stress tolerance, emotion regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness (communication). As time passed and I gained more confidence, I was able to assist the expressive therapy team in a variety of ways. A typical day for me included filling out daily documentation that helped the team document patients' behaviors during group, filing patient assessments, attending new patient assessment meetings, and preparing material for art therapy groups. I also had the opportunity to read over patients' psychological evaluations. This was something I truly enjoyed because it allowed me to connect with patients on a deeper level (knowing their story). If COVID-19 had not cut my experience short, I would have loved the opportunity to lead my own art therapy group.

There are bound to be a number of advantages and disadvantages to a facility like CCCA. I want to start with the advantages of interning at the Commonwealth Center. From the very beginning of the field placement journey I wanted to be in an environment that provided a hands-on opportunity. I had an experience that I truly don't think I would have gotten anywhere else. The Commonwealth Center gave me the ability to learn through seeing and doing. You can read



about a disorder in a textbook but being able to witness and talk with someone who is struggling makes a real difference and deepens the understanding of the disorder. Secondly, I learned a variety of skills such as time management and professional communication. Not only do you have to complete 150 site hours, you have to do it while balancing all of your other classwork. It is definitely doable but takes some trial and error before you figure out what works best. Also, with CCCA being interdisciplinary, I had to learn how to talk to and address a variety of professionals, but this is a skill that I will now carry with me for future careers. Further, I really enjoyed how we rarely did the same thing in a group and I was able to switch back and forth between expressive therapy members. This allowed me to learn different styles and ways of implementing this type of therapy, one that I was unfamiliar with before I started at CCCA. Although the relaxed part of the internship might be thought of as a disadvantage to others, it is an advantage to me. I liked how unpredictable the environment of group was. Lastly, Trudi was the best supervisor! She was there to make my experience whatever I wanted it to be. Everyone on the expressive therapy staff was beyond supportive and they made me feel welcome from the moment I started. I really appreciate how they made me feel comfortable enough to ask any question; whether it was a “housekeeping” question or just something I was curious about.

Although not many, there are some disadvantages to the Commonwealth Center. CCCA is an intense environment and not everyone is cut out for it. You tend to hear and see things that a typical person has never had to experience, and you have to keep your guard up at all times as patients try to “test the new guy”. However, for having somewhat of a thin skin, I quickly learned the importance of brushing hurtful or inappropriate remarks under the rug. Unpredictability in a group is something that I truly enjoyed, but the unpredictability of patients’ behavior is something that I had to get used to. Although it is out of their control, patients can have a rapid mood switch and it was important for me to be aware of the aggressive tendencies. With that said, everyone has to go through a certification training, TOVA, to help deal with these situations if and when they arise. Yes, I did witness some upsetting events, but I was never alone. Whether it was a member of the expressive therapy team or another staff member at CCCA, I was always taken care of. Lastly, I did not like how fast the patients would come and go. Quick turnarounds are the nature of an acute care facility, but I disliked how as soon as I started to form a connection with a patient they would be ready to discharge.

I learned the true meaning of “go with the flow” throughout my time at CCCA. Growing up in a large family I thought I had this covered, however, CCCA provided a new definition. Although I had a general sense of how my time would be spent at CCCA each day, I never *really* knew. I could walk through the doors and experience a calm, “normal” day or I could walk through the doors and hear code after code. I just had to go with the flow! For example, on occasion we would be in group and for an unforeseen circumstance the group would end early or I would have to leave the room for a period of time. I quickly learned to just be alert and help in any way I could. Looking back, this is how the nature of my career will be. After graduation I will be attending nursing school to achieve my goal of becoming a pediatric nurse. My experience at CCCA influenced my career goal greatly. No patient I will help will be the same,



have the same story, or react in the same way; just like the patients at CCCA. I am forever grateful for the opportunity I was given to experience this field of work.

For my contribution project I decided to focus on the true nature of a mental health facility from the eye of a staff member/employee. It is no question that these facilities are demanding and require resilient workers. However, the demands start to take a toll and staff burnout. The turnover rate in mental health facilities is extremely high and has been a concern for a number of years. The employees are exhausted and barely have the energy to do the “basics”, much less come up with activities to keep the patients on the units occupied. Research provides a number of ways to reduce the turnover rate and that is what sparked my idea of activity baskets for each of the units at CCCA. When I started at CCCA I quickly noticed that many, if not most, of the codes happen on the units. I rarely witnessed a code during group and hardly heard them called from the school building. That got me thinking. What makes the unit different from group therapy or school? There are many differences but the one that stood out to me the most was the fact that when patients are on the unit they have a lot of down time to think or get agitated. On the unit, patients tend to be sitting in their rooms, watching tv, or just aimlessly walking around. However, when they are in group or at school they have plenty of activities to keep them distracted and busy. The goal of the activity baskets is for them to be beneficial to both the patients and the staff/nurses. The baskets will hopefully serve as a quick and “at hand” resource for the patients when staff is busy. If the semester were to have gone as planned, I would have created a basket for each of the four units. However, due to COVID-19 our semester at our sites was cut short and I was not be able to physically give CCCA their baskets. Each basket would have included the following: a variety of coloring pages that the staff members could set out for patients, a deck of UNO cards as well as a deck of playing cards (with instructions), a pack of new markers for each unit, a binder with instructions to a variety of “quick and easy, fun games” (Simon Says, Charades, I Spy using coloring sheets), a variety of word finds that staff members could set out for patients, and Origami instructions for a variety of animals (bird, dog, penguin). I am saddened that I was not be able to put my idea to use, but I do believe that if I was able to execute my contribution project as planned the activity baskets would have provided a little bit of relief to the staff on each unit when patients start getting rowdy/aggressive due to down time.

Even with the unforeseen ending, interning at the Commonwealth Center for Children and Adolescents is an experience that I will never forget. I will cherish the memories made, good and “bad” and I am very grateful for Field Placement for giving me an opportunity I never thought I would have had.

### ***Fall 2019 – Lauren Ferry***

This semester, I had the opportunity to intern at the Commonwealth Center for Children and Adolescents (CCCA) in Staunton, VA. CCCA is a 48 bed, acute-care psychiatric inpatient



facility for individuals under the age of 18. The mission of CCCA is to provide high quality crisis stabilization, evaluation, and intensive short-term treatment that strengthen patients' resilience and hope. Children and adolescents hospitalized here are deemed to be a danger to self or others. As such, typical reasons for admission include threatened or attempted suicide, aggressive or assaultive behavior, and the need for a safe place for psychiatric evaluation and medication management. As an acute-care facility, CCCA focuses primarily on stabilization, meaning patients usually stay at the facility for three to ten days. During their stay at CCCA, patients have access to a great deal of services. I interned with the expressive therapy department, which includes art therapy and recreation therapy groups. The goal of the expressive therapy department is to offer safe and inclusive groups, often focusing on coping skills and self-expression. Patients also receive dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), a form of cognitive-behavioral therapy that focuses on regulating emotions and improving relationships with others. Additionally, each patient is assigned to a social worker, a clinical psychologist, and a psychiatrist. Patients also have the option to attend CCCA's school, organized through Staunton City Schools, so as not to fall behind on their studies.

During my first couple weeks interning with the expressive therapy department, I mainly observed the expressive therapists run expressive therapy groups and DBT groups. As I became more comfortable, I began co-facilitating these groups and eventually leading my own art therapy groups. My other responsibilities included preparing materials for art therapy groups and some administrative work, such as documenting patients' behaviors during groups. I also had the opportunity to read patients' psychological evaluation files.

Interning at the Commonwealth Center undoubtedly presented many advantages. The most meaningful aspect of the experience for me was the ability to interact with youths with a wide array of mental illnesses. It is one thing to learn about psychological disorders in a textbook, but observing and talking with people who struggle with these disorders made a real difference to my understanding. I found it especially interesting to observe variance in symptom presentation in disorders such as schizophrenia. Additionally, I gained valuable experience working in an interdisciplinary team, and I learned that proper communication between members of the treatment team is essential to effective treatment for patients. Further, I appreciated my supervisor offering to connect me with other professionals within the hospital if I was interested in learning more about a certain area, such as clinical psychology or admissions. Another major advantage of interning with the expressive therapy department in particular is the ability to work with different people and observe their different styles of conducting therapy groups. All of the expressive therapy staff have been incredibly supportive; they all treated me as part of the team rather than just an intern. I always felt secure in asking them any questions I had, and I have a lot of respect for the work that the expressive therapy staff do and the role they play within the hospital climate. Working with the expressive therapy staff and interacting with patients have definitely been my favorite aspects of interning at CCCA.



Although there are many advantages of working at the Commonwealth Center, some disadvantages do exist. CCCA is undoubtedly an intense environment. You will read and hear some unsettling things, and more likely than not some patients will try to test you and say purposefully offensive or insulting remarks. Letting these instances roll off you is definitely an important skill. CCCA can also sometimes be a dangerous environment, as some patients are unpredictable and aggressive. This was my least favorite part of this Field Placement site. However, every intern and staff member receives training on when and how to deal with situations that get out of hand. Although I have seen some unsettling events at CCCA, the expressive therapy staff were extremely helpful in debriefing these events afterwards with me, and I found that I could handle emotionally-testing events and information much better than I had initially expected. One other disadvantage to interning at CCCA compared to other sites is that, because it is an acute-care facility, patients are in and out of the hospital quite quickly. This can make it a bit difficult to develop working relationships with patients. However, this disadvantage can also be seen as an advantage as the quick patient turnaround rate means exposure to more types of people with different issues and strengths.

As a result of the ever-changing nature of CCCA's patient population, I wanted my contribution project to be something that could benefit all types of people. Furthermore, because the majority of my time was spent facilitating art therapy groups, I wanted my contribution project to enhance this experience for the patients. A major benefit of art therapy is increasing self-expression and self-esteem in patients. In order to further improve self-esteem, I wanted to work on integrating charitable work within the art therapy groups as a way to invoke a sense of autonomy and empathy in the patients. Examples of these group activities include writing letters and drawing pictures for deployed service members and veterans and decorating greeting cards for patients in hospice care. I also created informational leaflets about the charitable organizations and the positive effects the patients' art therapy projects will have on others. Overall, the patients seemed to enjoy these groups and the chance to move the focus from themselves to the needs of somebody else less fortunate.

Working at CCCA this semester has cemented my ambition of working with children and adolescents in the future. I went into this internship wanting to pursue clinical psychology as a career, and I still hold onto this goal, especially because I enjoyed interacting with patients and learning about their lives and the unique psychological issues that they deal with. Over the course of my time at the Commonwealth Center, I have noticed growth in my confidence as a future mental healthcare provider and in my abilities to work in an intense and unpredictable environment. My supervisor once told me, "if you can lead a group at CCCA, you can lead a group anywhere," and I think there is real truth to this. Moreover, I have learned the importance of flexibility. You never know what you will walk into on the unit or in the group therapy setting, and the ability to change plans if needed and think on your feet is critical in maintaining both safety and effective treatment for patients. Indeed, throughout my semester at CCCA, I have greatly appreciated my time working with patients and staff and the many practical skills and



knowledge I have developed as a result; I know I will be able to take these skills and apply them to other settings in the future.

*Fall 2019 – Emily Gardner*

The mission of The Commonwealth Center for Children and Adolescents is to provide high quality acute psychiatric evaluation, crisis stabilization, and intensive short-term treatment. The goal is to empower the children and their families to make developmentally appropriate choices and strengthen children's hope, resilience, and self-esteem. They provide structured, intensive services for different groups of people. The target populations are for individuals with mental illness and intellectual disability, individuals who abuse substances, or individuals who are under a temporary detention order from a juvenile detention center.

The experiences and opportunities that I had at the site were to assist and lead expressive art therapy groups under the supervision of expressive art and recreation therapists. I was able to review client records and I learned how to fill out different types of legal paperwork. I experienced dialectical behavioral therapy groups where we discussed mindfulness strategies and did different activities. Lastly, I had the opportunity to observe and conduct initial client assessments when clients were admitted to the facility. I liked this because I had the opportunity to obtain hands on experience on top of the administrative work. I obtained real world experience through this and every day was exciting.

Advantages of the site included the expressive art therapy team. I loved the people that I worked with, and everyone made me feel welcome. It felt like I was a part of the team. Working with a great team of people is a very important part of an internship, and I was fortunate that I loved everyone that I worked with. A disadvantage to this site was that the clients that came to the facility were a difficult population to work with. It was an intense experience, and I did not feel prepared. It was unlike anything that I had experienced before, and therefore I had to adjust quickly. It is a position that requires immediate action upon arrival and there is never a dull moment. It is a job that requires flexibility which is something that I struggled with. I thought that it was an interesting experience and I loved that every day was different and engaging. I liked that I was able to make a difference in people's lives.

I learned a lot about group facilitation through this experience. I got the opportunity to observe, and then ultimately lead groups. This experience was beneficial for me because in my future career as a therapist, I will be facilitating different groups. This is a meaningful experience for anyone who wants to do any group therapy sessions. I learned how to be flexible and adaptable to circumstances, because in this kind of facility, the circumstances are always changing. I feel like this experience has made me a more flexible person and this will be helpful for any career that I decide to go into. Especially with going into a therapy field with this population, flexibility and adaptability is important. This was an important skill that I developed more of and I think that is how I have grown the most through the experience. My goal is specifically to be a music therapist where I will be doing group facilitation with different populations. Having this leadership experience is influential to my future as a therapist.



My contribution project was incorporating music into psychiatric facilities. The purpose was to add musical and art elements into inpatient psychiatric care. The research that I found for my contribution project states that music has a strong therapeutic impact and I wanted the clients to experience this. Music has been found to decrease aggression, alleviate stress and anxiety, and provide a safe outlet for emotions. The way that I did this was by bringing in different music sensory materials. I made a music sensory box with different sensory materials and instruments. I included items like pom poms and felt mixed into the instrument box, so when the client was using the box, they would be able to explore the different materials. I also made instruments out of water bottles and beads. I had them covered in felt so there was the physical sensory element and the auditory element. In addition to those, I donated many hand percussion instruments so the client who is using the box is able to explore them. I also brought decorations and items like pillows to make the space comfortable. These items will be used in a music sensory corner, which will be a safe space for the clients to explore music and express themselves.

This was an incredible experience for me, however, deciding to do a field placement at this location was something that nobody can be prepared for. This is positive in some ways because it caused me to have a better perspective on life and be appreciative for what I have. However, some of the experiences that I had there will stick with me because I have never been exposed to something like this location before. It is something that I adjusted to and I enjoyed the experience, but I had to start to learn not to take meanness personally. Clients would be mean and aggressive towards me, and I would have to learn how to respond to it appropriately. There were many times when situations would get out of hand and the clients had to be redirected. I realized through this experience, that sometimes there is nothing that can be done for someone. I still did the best that I could, and I felt like, if even for that moment, I was making a difference in their lives. It was very rewarding, and it is an experience that I will never forget. Having this experience makes me feel like I am prepared for any time of group setting that I will be exposed to. I wish I had known going into it, truly how intense the experience was going to be. However, I don't think there was anything that would have been able to prepare me for this experience. Overall, I am glad that I did my field placement at The Commonwealth Center for Children and Adolescents.

### ***Spring 2019 – Maddie Dyer***

This past semester, I had the opportunity to intern with the expressive therapy department at the Commonwealth Center for Children and Adolescents (CCCA). CCCA is a psychiatric inpatient facility for children in Staunton, Va. The mission of CCCA is to provide high quality acute psychiatric care to Virginia residents under the age of 18. With CCCA being an acute care facility, they strive to get patients stabilized and transitioned back into the home setting within just a week's time. Because the average patient stay is so brief, CCCA really immerses the patient in a plethora of programs including expressive, occupational, and recreational therapies. Patients also attend classes during the day to stay caught up on school work during their stay. In addition to these services, each patient is also assigned a psychologist and social worker upon



admission. Optional resources for patients include substance abuse counselors, peer support specialists, and more.

The expressive therapy department within CCCA offers many field-related experiences to interns such as cofacilitating (and potentially leading) therapy groups for approximately 40 patients through music, art, and games. The intern's cofacilitating role in groups includes planning activities that are both engaging and therapeutic for the children *and* preparing materials whether it be musical instruments or paints and canvases. Some examples of afternoon group activities include paper crafts, collage making, sand art, playing ukuleles, baking or creating foods, and more. During my first several weeks, I mostly observed my supervisor during group therapy sessions; stepping in to help where I felt comfortable. Aside from the group therapy itself, I've had the opportunity to practice writing patient progress notes, completing intake assessments, and learning to navigate patient charts.

There are both advantages and disadvantages to interning at CCCA. To begin with advantages, the current Expressive Therapy department is wonderfully helpful and supportive of their interns. Throughout the semester, my supervisor and coworkers were very encouraging but also very considerate of my thoughts and comfort levels when I started taking steps out of my comfort zone and begin leading groups. They made, what could have been a stressful experience, a very enjoyable and empowering one; and they were always sure to recognize and congratulate me on my small successes and accomplishments. I found this to be very helpful and motivating, especially at times when I would question my own performance and capabilities.

There are multiple expressive therapists that work in the department (currently, three) which I found to really enhance my experience. Having more than one professional to work under allowed me to watch and learn from their differing styles of work. In addition to the three expressive therapists, the office is also shared by a recreational therapist and a peer support specialist. With this many full-time staff in the office, there was always someone at the site to supervise me if I wanted to come in. That being said, a huge advantage to this placement is its flexibility with scheduling. Because groups are run in the morning and afternoon all week long, I am able to come early in the morning and do groups or come later in the evening (I've been able to work as late as 8:00pm). Another advantage to this site is its multidisciplinary approach to treatment. I had many opportunities to interact with and observe the other members of the treatment team such as social workers, psychologists, nurses, and both occupational and recreational therapists. Another advantage to interning at CCCA is the variability across patients; I was able to observe the presentations of a broad range of psychological disorders. The patients, while all under the age of 18, are very diverse in background, ethnicity, behavior, symptom presentation, and experiences. Not only is working with this population *so, so* interesting, but it fosters an immense amount of learning and allow me to develop a more well-rounded understanding of the prevalence and importance of addressing mental health in children.

I think that what I liked most about this site was how frequently I was able to interact with the patients. I would estimate that approximately 75% of my time at CCCA was experiential with the kids and 25% of my time was spent behind the scenes researching group ideas, preparing art materials, and learning how to write and process patient notes and forms. I found



both my office work and my work around the kids to be very rich and interesting; I was never bored while on site!

There are a couple disadvantages to interning at CCCA I'd like to mention. The biggest potential disadvantage to interning at CCCA is the intense nature of its environment. The patients at CCCA are often victims of past trauma and can present with extreme and/or dangerous behaviors. Hearing stories from patients or learning about patient histories can be very emotionally distressing. Patients will curse, make inappropriate remarks, and say intentionally hurtful or offensive things. If you are typically uncomfortable with this type of behavior, then I would not recommend this site to you. If you are, however, open minded and willing to see past a patient's behaviors and for what they truly are - a child who needs support and an outlet to express him/herself – then this site might be a great fit. The only other disadvantage to the site is that with the facility being located in Staunton, I had to allocate an additional hour (which does not count towards your on-site experience hours) for traveling there and back each visit.

This semester has been a huge learning curve for me in both my general knowledge and my knowledge about my own career interests. As far as field-related knowledge, I feel I have a much better understanding of the innerworkings of child psychology *and* what exactly is an art therapist's role in a psychiatric inpatient setting. An area I feel I have really grown in during my time at CCCA is patience and appreciation; to me, small steps are huge steps when it comes to progress. I feel that my time and practice at CCCA has definitely prepared me to go into my next line of work with greater confidence. Coming into this, my career aspirations involved working in a private practice setting. However, after my experience at CCCA, I am strongly considering careers in the adolescent and/or inpatient setting because of the satisfaction I get from helping these populations and watching them grow. Overall, my time interning with expressive therapies at CCCA has been the most rich, diverse, and eye-opening experience I have had so far and I can't wait to see how this experience helps me into the future as I move forward into graduate school for clinical mental health counselling.

### ***Fall 2018 – Amber Morris***

This semester, I had the opportunity to intern with the Expressive Therapy department at the Commonwealth Center for Children and Adolescents (CCCA) in Staunton, Virginia. CCCA is a 48 bed, psychiatric inpatient facility for individuals under the age of eighteen. Individuals hospitalized here are considered "in crisis." They are typically deemed a danger to themselves or others are placed at CCCA for crisis stabilization. This means they stay at the Commonwealth center for approximately 10 days. During their stay, the goal is to alter medications as needed, and give children and adolescents the therapeutic coping mechanisms that they need to obtain a healthy lifestyle outside of the hospital. It is not uncommon for children and adolescents to use their stay at CCCA as a sort of middle ground to a residential facility. The overall goal of CCCA, is to evaluate, stabilize the patients mental state, and help children and families make suitable decisions for how to move forward and sustain stabilization. This goal is seen directly in their mission statement: "To provide high quality acute psychiatric evaluation, crisis stabilization, and



intensive short-term treatment that empowers children and their families to make developmentally appropriate choices and that strengthens children's hope, resilience, and self-esteem."

The majority of my time at the Commonwealth Center was spent with the Expressive Therapy Department. Expressive Therapy encompasses many creative art therapies including recreational therapy, art therapy, music therapy, and many more. During my first weeks as an intern, I would observe and shadow the other expressive therapists during their different groups. Though, I quickly took on the role of planning and facilitating my own groups. Even though my internship was with the Expressive Therapy Department, there was always the opportunity for me to do and learn more. I shadowed the occupational therapist and peer support specialist on multiple occasions. I was also given the opportunity to sit in on staff meetings, new admission, and discharges.

There were many advantages to interning at the Commonwealth Center. One of the main advantages was having seemingly infinite supervisors. Though my actual supervisor was the Expressive Therapy supervisor, Trudi Goodwin, I had many other individuals that were always in my corner, willing to help and teach me when possible. The other two expressive therapists were always around to help and gave me the opportunity to see how different therapists go about facilitating group activities, what kind of boundaries they draw, and how they add their own spin to different activities. The Peer Support Specialist at CCCA was also immensely helpful. Though she wasn't a direct part of the Expressive Therapy team, she was always willing to attend my groups if I needed extra help. All four of these ladies were always welcoming, helpful, and educating. Having multiple people working for and closely with the ET department allowed for a family sort of atmosphere, decompression after major events, and backup when needed. We often relied on one another to cover groups after major interactions or people to debrief with after a traumatizing event or even just a rowdy group.

Another advantage of working at the Commonwealth Center, is the balance between safety and freedom. Trudi was welcome to allowing me to facilitate my own groups by week two. She made it clear that her only goal was for me to learn as much as possible while being as comfortable as possible. If there was ever a situation that was new or different, someone was there to make sure you were comfortable or allow you to remove yourself from the situation. I never felt like I was held back from being able to learn, but I also never felt that I was thrown in the deep end to sink or swim.

My time at CCCA was largely advantageous and gave me a plethora of new knowledge. There were however, a few drawbacks. Being an intern here is not for the faint of heart. As I mentioned, all of the children that stay at the Commonwealth Center, are in crisis. They can be aggressive, suicidal, homicidal, etc. Many have extensive backgrounds of trauma, abuse, neglect, and mental illness. Reading case file and working with children in this state can take a large toll on anyone. I learned very early on that when I left CCCA at night, I needed to leave everything. The kids, the feelings, and the judgments. Along with this, CCCA is a short-term facility. It is not a place where making relationships with patients is easy and/or appropriate. I worked two days a week and it was not uncommon to come back and have an entirely new census.



I learned a lot during my time at the Commonwealth Center. I was able to get real world experience and see how different theories and techniques I have learned in my many psychology courses play out in real life. I learned how hard it can be to connect with a child in need and then see them go home to an unhealthy family dynamic. I learned just how severe the mental health issues are in children and adolescents in Virginia and surrounding states. And overall, I learned that my passion for children and adolescents with mental illness is something that I must pursue.

When I first arrived at the Commonwealth Center at the end of August, they were just beginning their transition from facility wide Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) to Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). This allowed for me to learn a lot about both therapeutic techniques as well as how they are implemented in short-term stabilization facilities. This also played a large role in my contribution projects. Transforming to an entirely new therapeutic technique in a facility this size is time consuming and intensive. In order for DBT to be effective, it has to be used in all aspects of the facility, not just during therapeutic groups. For this to happen, staff must be educated on the ins and outs of what DBT is and how it works. For my contribution project, I made six posters outlining different DBT acronyms and main ideas. These posters will be used in training sessions for the staff. Then, they will be hung in the hallways and on the units as daily reminders to both the patients – to use the skills they are learning in groups, and staff – to continuously facilitate DBT ideas throughout the day.