

Those With Top-Secret Jobs Need Someone to Talk to, Too

The people who do the nation's top-secret work at Fort Meade, Maryland, are vulnerable to some of the same combat stressors experienced by trigger-pullers. Counseling is available on-post, but the stigma of asking for help has been a barrier. To help service members, families and civilian employees discreetly obtain mental health referrals, a new Resiliency and Education Center will open soon. Col. Chris Nyland, who, as garrison commander until the end of July, was one of several commanders who had a hand in shaping the facility over 10 years, explained how the center will minimize the stigma of seeking help.

1. Does Fort Meade have mental health resources now?

There are a ton of resiliency and education services for our service members. This is a joint base, and we've got members from every service to include Space Force Guardians, the National Guard and the Army Reserve that are all part of our mission partners. We have 15 to 20 different facilities that deliver services, [but] many of the services are only accessible by our service members. The DoD civilians that make up such a large portion of the workforce here oftentimes don't have that access.

2. Will the new center consolidate those services?

It's not designed to consolidate the facilities, but to be a central hub where, rather than trying to find the right place to go, a person can walk into the center's front door where they'll be greeted by facilitators who will talk with the person, try to develop an understanding of the need and then connect them with the right services.

3. How did the idea for the center come about?

This effort started about 10 years ago. The senior commanders on the installation that were responsible [for] those service members started to see some of the things that [they] were struggling with and began a dialogue and a discussion internally. Then we brought in our community partners to talk about how we could

Col. Chris Nyland.
U.S. ARMY



better support those service members and civilians, not only in the execution of their mission, but in dealing with some of the unique stressors that come from that mission.

4. What are those stressors?

The service members and civilians on this installation are conducting a wartime mission on a daily basis, in direct contact with elements that want to harm U.S. national interests. They're working out of secret facilities 24/7, 365 days a year. When they walk out of those facilities and go home, they aren't allowed to talk to their friends or families about what they've done that day. A service member who's been working a long shift to defend part of our cyber infrastructure goes out to the gas station, he's filling up his car, and he's looking at people just going about their normal lives not even

aware of the efforts on their behalf. It can absolutely start to take a toll.

5. Is it hard for them to seek help?

Like many of our service members, they try to avail themselves of the behavioral health services that the military attempts to provide. But what they've struggled with is not only the normal perceived stigma for seeking help, but also concerns about, "Well, if I seek help, I may lose my clearance and be unable to do my job." There were a number of barriers that leadership identified that people believed were between them and the help. This facility is one effort to remove those barriers.

6. What does the center hope to achieve?

To equip our service members and civilians with the tools they need to deal with their worst days and come out on the other side, not just as survivors, but also stronger for it. In my mind, as a commander, I see asking for help as a sign of strength, and I think this facility has the potential to be a place where soldiers, sailors, Marines, airmen and Guardians, families and civilians go into a welcoming environment and are seen as acting from a position of strength in asking for help. Do I hope, is it the vision that it will have tangible impacts on suicidal behavior and thoughts, on domestic violence, on family relations, on interpersonal relations? Absolutely.

7. When will the center open its doors?
January 2023, that's the plan. —Gina Cavallaro ★