Students allege unsolicited, ‘traumatic’ treatment from UL counseling office

David Reed
NEWS DIRECTOR

While many stressed college students at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette find emotional support at the Counseling and Testing Center, others are finding just the opposite.

According to a UL Lafayette police report, on March 13 at 9 p.m., Siraaj Salem, a 20-year-old senior in criminal justice, was arrested for “disturbing the peace by loud and profane language and battery of a police officer, after being detained for medical reasons.”

What were these medical reasons? According to Salem, simply admitting to having suicidal thoughts at one point in her life on a routine form at the counseling and testing center.

Earlier in the day, Salem said she circled “Yes” on a form asking if she had suffered from suicidal thoughts in the past.

“I circled yes because it’s important to be truthful with someone you are talking to, and I wanted to establish a client-counselor relationship, so I didn’t feel like hiding that was necessary,” Salem said.

When Salem met with her counselor, she told them she wasn’t feeling this way at the time and simply wanted to be upfront about her past.

“It was like, ‘You know ma’am, I assure you,’” Salem said, “‘This is not what I came here for, this is not on my mind and this is not how I’m feeling at the present time or at all.’”

Despite this, Salem said the counselor was reluctant to address present issues and was only concerned with her past suicidal thoughts.

“Everything we talked about just bounced right back to that. She would ask questions like, ‘So if you were to feel those thoughts what would you do about it?’ And it would just be a moment of silence where I’m like ‘I don’t know. I’m not thinking about it. Why am I being persecuted for my past thoughts?’” Salem said. “She is making my history my present, and that is not what it was. She fabricated for that questionnaire to be how I was presently feeling and that’s just not what it was.”

According to Salem, it later seemed as though the counselor understood, however she soon realized this was not the case when multiple police officers tracked her down to the Edith Garland Dupré Library and demanded she be taken to the hospital.

“All of a sudden I see bodies surround me,” Salem said. “I look up to my right and it’s an officer, and I look to my left and it’s five other officers. I counted six.”

Salem said one of the police officers pushed her chest with excessive force and then refused to give her her name or badge number.

“I’m slapped dead in the chest, mid-turn, so I’m spun around, and at that point, my hands are behind my back,” Salem said. “I can’t even explain to you how confused I was, and how hurt I was.

“I was like, ‘But wait, your officer just hit me in the chest. Is there no consequence for that? What are your badge numbers and what are your names?’ And at that point he declined every one of my questions.”

Salem is unfortunately not the only student who has been placed in this situation.

Ian Coats, a senior in education at UL Lafayette, said he is now thousands of dollars in debt from two ambulance rides that were ordered by the Counseling and Testing Center. He said he didn’t have plans to hurt himself either time.

“I told the director I didn’t think I should be forced into an ambulance against my will, but nevertheless, that’s what happened,” Coats said. “That was really, really traumatic. I got wheeled out in a stretcher, tied up, into the ambulance in the middle of the school day. There was a bunch of people crowded watching, and that was very, very traumatic.”

After being sent to the hospital, he was released after they found no need for him to be there.

“That whole experience cost about $4,000 in ambulance and hospital fees,” he said.

The second ambulance ride occurred after speaking to a UL Lafayette counselor over the phone, as he had been having suicidal thoughts earlier in the day.

“I had called the counselor on call,” Coats said. “She came from her house to meet me at UL, but this was the same woman who called the ambulance the first time.

“There was no therapeutic or personal interactions. I told her what had happened. She walked away, called the ambulance while she had walked away, came back and told me she had just called the ambulance.”

Salem said she believes UL Lafayette is more concerned with avoiding lawsuits than helping students with mental health problems.

“UL wants to sweep it under the rug, and they don’t want people with any kind of thoughts or past like that on their campus because they don’t want to be the ones responsible for anything bad happening,” Salem said.

“UL finds their reputation to be oh so precious and just in case that happens they need to dot their i’s and cross their t’s; that way when it comes back they can’t blame UL for it.”

UL Lafayette gave a statement on the issue:

“The University follows the guidelines set forth by the Jed Foundation, a nationally recognized nonprofit organization working to promote emotional health and prevent suicide among college, university and high school students.”

While Coats is upset about what has happened to him, he acknowledged the issue is complicated.

“I do think it’s a little more complex than ‘counselor is bad,’ but I do think she was in the wrong as well,” Coats said.

The UL Lafayette police department declined to comment as it is still an open investigation.

The Counseling and Testing Center also chose not to comment.