
Wendi C. Thomas: Paper suits are cold, cruel treatment for county prisoners

By Wendi C. Thomas

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Jimmie Starkey was the last one.

He was the last county prisoner to be released in freezing temperatures wearing a thin paper jumpsuit and little else — and that's the truth, promised James Coleman, director of the Shelby County Corrections Center.

More later on Coleman's vow to treat humans, well, more humanely.

First, sit with the shame: These men and women got less protection from the elements than trash bagged and set on the curb.

Most inmates leave the prison in paper suits and are met outside by family bearing a change of clothes.

Not Starkey, who was, as many inmates are, driven from the penal farm 10 miles west to an empty lot downtown, where it's easier for them to catch a ride.

But for reasons Coleman doesn't understand and won't defend, on Monday night when Starkey was released, he never got the coat or long johns customarily given to underdressed inmates when the weather is cold.

It was just above freezing at 7 a.m. the next morning, when Sharkey, a serial trespasser, showed up at Manna House, a homeless ministry near downtown.

A photo of Sharkey — staring blankly at the camera, wearing a pale blue jumpsuit unzipped to the waist — greeted me Tuesday when I signed onto Facebook, screaming "I told you so!"

For years Manna House volunteers have lamented the contempt required to put people in paper suits. I looked but never had a suit sighting, so I chalked it up to passion-fueled hyperbole.

Plus, it was implausible that anyone would be so callous, even to an ex-con.

Right? Wrong.

Replacing the paper suits with real clothes has been on Coleman's to do list since he became director three years ago.

The problem is storage, he explained this week in his office as he pulled out a plastic-covered package about as thick as a phone book and wide as an LP.

He doesn't have room to pile up clothing for the soon-to-be released, but he would if he had the \$8,000 machine like the one that created this shrink-wrapped bundle with a shirt, pants and a pair of shoes inside.

By the end of January, Coleman hopes, a relative or friend will be able to leave a set of clothes two days before an inmate's scheduled release. In the room where the offender would have changed into a paper suit, he'll instead pull out street clothes from the plastic bundle.

That won't help people like Sharkey, so Coleman is asking churches or other charitably minded organizations to supply season-appropriate clothing.

That's good news to Elaine Blanchard, an ordained minister and storyteller who was incredulous when she heard about a female Manna House guest released in a paper suit when the low was 33 degrees.

"Is it true that we humiliate people who have already served their sentence by putting them out in public with only paper to protect their naked bodies?" wondered Blanchard on her aptly named blog, "Can You Believe It?"

"Is it true that we stop caring about people if they get into trouble and have to spend time in jail?" asked Blanchard, who started Prison Stories, a storytelling circle of female inmates, whose lives she turns into plays.

"Are we living with disposable neighbors all around us? And can we identify them by their disposable clothing?"

She turned her (fruitful) search for that woman and answers into a sermon, "Belonging to the Truth," which she delivered at Prescott Memorial Baptist Church last month.

"The truth is that we are called by the example of Jesus to clothe the naked, visit those who are in prison and be compassionate toward those who have been left outside in the cold."

That these stories didn't strike me as believable, that so few knew about the paper suits proves this: We say we care about the poor, but really, we don't. We crow that we are our brother's keeper, but we are not.

If we were, we would accept the testimony of those who work with the most vulnerable. We would search for those culpable. We would interrogate those responsible. We would persevere until justice was served.

We wouldn't be so cold.



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