

Jack Strain, Jr.

Sheriff

Ex-Officio Tax Collector
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E. Alfred Strain
Chief Deputy
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July 20, 2010

Letters to the Editor
Times Picayune
3800 Howard Ave.
New Orleans, LA 70125

Ladies and Gentlemen:

In the recent public exchange between me and the ACLU regarding the care of mentally ill inmates, the Times Picayune's editorial page has attempted to frame the issue around the idea of inmates' comfort: a position taken by the ACLU. Your newspaper has completely missed the essence of the problem. The issue is not about anyone's comfort. It is about saving lives - period. If this is to become a constitutional debate, I suggest this Sheriff's Office has done more than anyone to protect the rights of these inmates – particularly their right to life.

For years, our leaders in Baton Rouge have completely gutted the mental health system in Louisiana. I have been very vocal about the need to restore this funding. It is a shame that when I talk about this issue, there are no editorials supporting this idea. There are no front page stories admonishing the legislature for letting such a crucial part of our health care system fall literally to pieces. Not until the issue of prisoner "comfort" arose did the Times Picayune spill so much ink on the need to address this problem.

In open letters, ACLU and I have both made our positions perfectly clear on this issue. I find it astonishing that your paper would treat their position as fact and mine as defensive posturing. My letter clearly defined my position, but I have nothing to defend. My medical staff is acting in the best interest of people who cannot help themselves and would almost certainly die in jail were it not for the steps we have taken.

When we book an inmate into the jail who is so completely unstable as to present an immediate and real threat of committing suicide, our sole responsibility to that inmate is to save his or her life. In the absence of the state's involvement with mental health care, someone else must step forward and assume the responsibility for these inmates' lives. We have done just that, despite not being the appropriate authority to do so.

Our medical staff has instituted dramatic measures in order to protect these people. Usually, this can be accomplished through what most would consider moderate measures. Occasionally, however, an inmate's violence and/or suicidal intentions is so severe the only way to ensure their safety is by placing them where they can be under constant and immediate observation. Are they uncomfortable during this time? Sure. Are they alive at the end of it? In every single case to date.

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The irony of this debate is that the Times Picayune has attempted to paint this Sheriff's Office as having treated people in an inhumane manner. I would suggest the opposite is true. I would further suggest that the failure of this newspaper to properly draw public attention to this matter is more of an injustice to these inmates than anything they accuse us of doing. Has the Times Picayune become a toothless watchdog?

If funding were to be removed overnight from traditional hospitals, there would be shouts from the rooftops heard around the world. But with the gutting of the mental health system, we hear hardly a peep from the Times Picayune. When St. Tammany creates a solution in this vacuum of state provided mental health care, we are castigated as uncaring and inhumane. If, over the years, the Times Picayune had raised public awareness on this issue, maybe we wouldn't be having this discussion today. It is hypocritical of your paper to fiddle while such a vital part of our communities burns, then leap from the shadows when liberal organizations such as the ACLU fling arrows toward those trying to address the crisis.

It may come as a surprise to you, but the majority of our citizens don't support the idea of coddling criminals. (Perhaps the refusal of the "old" media to recognize this is a reason they are going the way of the dinosaur). And let us not forget, the very people whose lives we are desperately trying to save are accused of felony crimes – many of them violent crimes. This never involves misdemeanor or traffic violators. I believe most people would be more than satisfied that we even made an effort to save them, though the method may be slightly uncomfortable or inconvenient to the inmate.

I, like many other St. Tammany residents, am tired of seeing the obvious politically left leanings of the editorial desk reflected in the pages of your paper. And I am tired of the bards of Howard Street issuing ill-informed judgments about an issue based solely on the word of opportunistic and publicity-addicted organizations such as the ACLU.

I am quite certain after reading this letter, the poison pens of the editorial staff will once again be trained on me and, more unfortunately, on the hard working men and women of this agency who have made a Herculean effort to save lives. Before you put pen to paper, however, consider how you would feel if your son or daughter was in jail and absolutely determined to commit suicide. Which method of security would you want applied? If it were my child involved, I would say make them as uncomfortable as you need to, just keep them alive.

Finally, of all the parts of this tragedy I find upsetting, the most shameful is having to see American servicemen and servicewomen who lose their lives fighting overseas relegated to back page news while the "comfort" of an inmate is deemed worthy of the front page. In the July 15, 2010 edition of the Times Picayune, there was a story about the deaths of eight of our nation's bravest. It was a small story. And it was on page 16.

Perhaps it's time to pull your head from your printing presses and start writing about things that are truly important to the people you claim to serve.

Sincerely,

Sheriff Jack Strain, Jr.
St. Tammany Parish