

Safety First

THE SAFETY SMOCK is perhaps the ugliest piece of clothing ever created. But it may save lives.

Lonna Mercklinghaus of Santa Cruz invented the garment to prevent prisoners from killing themselves. Today, more than 100 jails and prisons across the country use the smock, a bulky one-piece item made of dark blue heavy-duty nylon. As far as Mercklinghaus is aware, no inmate wearing one has died from self-inflicted wounds.

It's not a restraining device; it doesn't keep prisoners from moving around. Rather, it's designed to provide a modicum of warmth and covering, and yet be so tough a suicidal inmate can't rip it apart and make a fatal noose or garrote.

Mercklinghaus, 49, was a nurse at the Santa Cruz County Jail in the late '80s. She learned that a "small but significant number" of people who have just been arrested are considered to be at immediate risk of committing suicide, so they're put in a safety cell to await a psychiatric evaluation. These rooms, which are also found in prisons, are specially built to prevent suicide attempts; for example, there's no glass within reach.

Virtually any article of standard clothing can be used by



Lonna Mercklinghaus models her creation, the Safety Smock.

a determined prisoner as a tool for hanging or strangulation, and the first priority of jailers is to keep the inmates alive rather than preserve their modesty. "So the people in these cells are buck naked," says Mercklinghaus, a

frank and down-to-earth woman. "They're in these empty cells, stripped of their clothes, stripped of their dignity, feeling worthless. They can't even sleep because they're so vulnerable and cold. It just seemed so horri-

ble to me. I felt that if I could make some kind of temporary clothing for them, while still keeping them from killing themselves, I really had to do it."

In late 1988 she sat down to design her smock, and six months later sold the first one, to Orange County; it was made of denim, the strongest clothing material she could find. She has made many improvements over the years; in 1991 she switched to Cordura nylon—"much tougher than denim," she notes, "but still soft and washable." Each garment costs \$90 to make and retails for \$195; she has sold about 1,000 of them. Her clients include Santa Clara, Monterey and San Francisco counties.

Mercklinghaus, a Quaker, works regularly on behalf of the homeless in Santa Cruz, and if she ever gets rich from the smock business wants to open a "shelter for old drunks, the guys out there who are *so* beaten down by life." She says she has "no competition to speak of." Oh, some guy in Florida makes something "kind of similar," but she believes her product to be "far superior." Evidence for this: Dade County, Fla., just ordered 97 of her smocks.

BOB FROST