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Inmate wins dirty mattress lawsuit

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HARTFORD -- A prison inmate from Bridgeport who claimed state correction officials inhumanely forced him to sleep on a ripped and moldy mattress for nearly a year was awarded \$12,000 by a federal court jury.

The jury of four men and three women deliberated about four hours before arriving at a verdict against the state [Department of Correction](#) -- including a \$7,000 punitive verdict.

"This sends a powerful message to state corrections officials that they can't treat inmates inhumanely and without respect," said Bridgeport lawyer [Antonio Ponvert III](#), who represented [Harold Bell](#), who is serving a 12-year term for assault. "If we treat inmates like animals while they are in prison, that won't bode well when they are released back into the community."

Correction Department spokesman [Andrius Banevicius](#) said officials were not prepared to comment on the verdict at this time.

In June 2008, Bell, 38, filed a complaint with officials at the [MacDougall-Walker Correctional Center](#) in Suffield that his mattress was slit down the center and smelled of vomit and mildew. He continued to complain about the mattress, which he claimed was causing him medical issues throughout 2008 and into 2009, but correction officials would not provide him with a new one.

He subsequently filed a hand-written lawsuit in federal court.

Ponvert said the biggest obstacle they had to overcome was convincing members of a jury to ignore their obvious prejudice against felons.

"Mr. Bell doesn't contest he should be in prison, but we asked the jurors not to let their feelings about the plaintiff cloud the issue that his Eighth Amendment rights were violated in this case," Ponvert said.

Bell, formerly of Bridgeport, was convicted of shooting a 36-year-old Seymour man in front of the man's 10-year-old son in Bridgeport in 2005.