

After incarceration, basic necessities like clean, appropriate clothing are imperative for everyday wear and for obtaining and keeping a job. When it comes to the story of the repentant prodigal son returning home in Luke 15, his father ensured he was well provided for asking his servants to get the best robe and put it on him. But many ex-prisoners are without a supportive family. And, that's where the church can step in.

Considering that ex-prisoners typically return to society with no wardrobe – or the financial ability to acquire one – the importance of proper clothing is significant for success and feelings of self-respect.

For volunteers who want to help ex-prisoners build a new life, being part of a team to start a clothes closet ministry might just be the perfect fit. This team would help get the closet going, volunteer time when available, and recruit other church members to assist in continuing the ministry.

In planning a clothes closet ministry, consider the following steps:

- Gather a team of volunteers who can help with various tasks in launching the clothes closet ministry
- Make sure you have approval from your pastor and church leadership to start this ministry
- Set general operational guidelines for the ministry, such as who will be eligible to receive clothing, how much clothing a person can receive at a time, whether you will be open certain days or only by appointment, what recordkeeping may be necessary, etc.
- Choose a space/location for the clothes closet (i.e. church basement, empty classroom, etc.) and determine what fix-ups might be needed to make the area ready
- Decide whether you need a bathroom with mirrors nearby so people can try on clothes
- Gather donated or used equipment that will be needed, such as clothing racks, large plastic bins with lids, hangers, shelves, tables, chairs, etc.
- Determine the types of clothing you will offer and have a church-wide or community-wide clothes drive to stock the closet
- Announce days/times of workdays to fix up the clothes closet, sort and tag clothing, set up displays, and prepare for opening
- Set up a system to keep track of guests coming in and number of items given away, as well as how to manage the inventory and keep the closet well stocked
- Line up volunteers who will operate the clothes closet and make sure they understand operational procedures as well as the hours they are “on duty”
- Set aside time during a church service to dedicate the clothes closet ministry and officially announce the “grand opening”



To learn more about starting and maintaining a clothes closet ministry, follow these links:

- Here's an article titled, "How to Start a Clothing Ministry" from EHow Contributor, Melanie Williamson: http://www.ehow.com/how_5114667_start-clothing-ministry.html
- Read about The Closet, a ministry in Charlotte, North Carolina, and how they provide "Closet Dollars" (fake money) to "customers" who can "buy" items that are tagged with very low prices. This encourages shoppers to budget their "money" and make wise decisions. Read more at: <http://www.theclosetministry.com/about/free-shopping-days#sthash.kX18A5re.dpuf>.

You can be a huge blessing to ex-prisoners by meeting their practical need for clothes, but also by offering them dignity and strength for the road ahead.

