

Fugitives seek tax refunds, get handcuffs instead

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In an effort to reduce a backlog of 12,000 outstanding warrants, Ron Bateman thought of an unusual idea for a sheriff: He started lying.

With the help of Comptroller Peter Franchot, Bateman, the Anne Arundel county sheriff, arranged for the state of Maryland to send 500 fictional letters to people wanted on criminal warrants.

The letters told the fugitives Franchot had conducted an audit and found they were owed a tax return of \$572.26. The wanted men were told to report to the Treasury Building on Saturday to receive their refund check.

But when the fugitives arrived, there was no money waiting.

"You mean there's no check?" one asked while being arrested.

"I knew this was a setup," another lamented, "but the rent was due."

Yet another complained: "I sat in traffic for an hour just to get locked up?"

In all, 40 wanted people were arrested — clearing 54 warrants, according to a statement Bateman released recounting some fugitives' responses when they learned they had been tricked.

There were no serious violent criminals in the group, but two people were arrested for felony warrants, according to the sheriff.

"It ended up being very successful," Bateman said. "We got a good number of warrants served. In eight hours of work, we served what would have taken 40 hours."

How does he feel about resorting to lying to help clear the backlog?

"It's approved by the Supreme Court," Bateman said.

The sheriff said he's made it his mission to reduce the number of outstanding warrants in the county and has been successful.

Unserved warrants in Anne Arundel County now number 10,000 — down from 12,000 a year ago.

Each of the wanted people was arrested Saturday without incident.

Warren Hansen, a spokesman for Franchot, said he wouldn't exactly call the fake letters "lying."

"Let's put it this way," he said. "They didn't leave with a check."

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EXAMINER OCT 23 2007