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Safe Surrender program would clear warrants quickly and safely

City seeks to bring initiative here

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Officials want to bring to Baltimore a fugitive surrender program that has proved effective in other cities, setting up a west-side church as a safe place where people being sought on outstanding warrants can turn themselves in and get a quick resolution of their cases.

The program, Safe Surrender, has attracted thousands of fugitives to surrender in cities, including Detroit, Philadelphia and Washington, and is geared toward those with nonviolent felonies, misdemeanors and traffic crimes. A legal assembly line of intake services, case review with a public defender and disposition by a judge are provided on-site, with the church setting seen as calming and nonconfrontational.

Baltimore police made a pitch for the program this week during a meeting of the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council, a monthly gathering of police, prosecutors, judges and others. Though the U.S. Marshals Service has organized and funded surrender initiatives in other cities, Baltimore has not been able to move to the front of the line, and officials are hoping to facilitate the initiative locally by culling funds from participating agencies.

Col. John Bevilacqua said it is too early to set a date for the initiative, but New Shiloh Baptist Church has agreed to serve as the host site. Lt. Col. Jesse Oden, who leads the Warrant Apprehension Task Force, said he believes Baltimore can clear 5,000 warrants during the surrender program.

"Everybody here will have some responsibility if this is to be a success," Oden said.

The program offers fugitives a chance to resolve their lingering legal matters and clear their consciences. Those who turned themselves in elsewhere noted a desire to start over, a fear of being arrested, and a desire to obtain a driver's license or to get a job.

A blue rectangular graphic with white text that reads: "Finally, a reason to jump for joy!"

"Nobody is giving anybody a get-out-of-jail-free card," said Camden, N.J., Superior Court Judge Irvin Snyder, who attended the presentation and was involved with a Safe Surrender program. "All we're doing is promising that the process will be carried out [efficiently for everyone]."

Safe Surrender could help people such as Glenda Thompson. The 53-year-old was recently arrested and briefly detained on a battery warrant from 1996, and prosecutors eventually dropped the case because they could not locate or substantiate that the original complainant. Thompson said that as a result of the arrest she lost touch with her daughter, at whose home she had been staying, and she doesn't know how to get in contact with her.

But it may be geared just as much toward helping city police with a staggering warrant backlog, which yesterday stood at 42,000. Serving warrants is a painstaking process, with teams of officers crisscrossing the city and spending hours trying to track down individuals. The warrant task force serves from 30 to 100 warrants a day, with additional warrants cleared through unrelated arrests and other initiatives.

In Anne Arundel County, Sheriff Ron Bateman has used stunts such as promises of phony tax returns and Valentine's Day gift baskets to apprehend fugitives, though even those efforts resulted in a small number of cleared warrants.

The idea for the Safe Surrender program began with the marshals service, which organized an initiative in Cleveland and has successfully sponsored similar efforts elsewhere. In June, more than 7,000 people turned themselves in on an estimated 11,500 warrants during a Safe Surrender initiative in Detroit, more than the previous eight cities combined.

Judge Thomas A. Brown Jr., the criminal division presiding judge of Camden's Superior Court, said officials there did not know what to expect when they decided to hold the surrender initiative.

"When we arrived in the morning, there were 500 people lined up around the block," Brown said. "There were people showing up from all parts of the state, and even out of the state."



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