

Those in warrants urged to turn selves in

By Justin Fenton

THE BALTIMORE SUN

1 Thousands of fugitives being sought on minor warrants for crimes committed in Baltimore and Baltimore County are being urged to turn themselves in this month and expedite their cases at a make-shift court set up in a West Baltimore church and outreach center.

The Fugitive Safe Surrender program will run June 16-19 and is aimed at offenders being sought on nonviolent felony or misdemeanor warrants. The warrant backlog is at more than 40,000, and Mayor Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake said tens of thousands of people live in fear or are unable to get jobs because they are unwilling to get the warrants cleared.

But officials hope the New Metropolitan Baptist Church, in the 1500 block of McCulloh St., will represent a haven and help of fenders and police clear the cases. Prosecutors promise "favorable consideration" to those who turn themselves in.

"Having the faith community join hand in hand with our law enforcement allows people that are in this vulnerable state an opportunity to come in, feel secure, and

know they're not being set up or putting themselves in danger," Rawlings-Blake said.

Law enforcement agencies have been grappling with an unrelenting backlog of warrants for years. The regional Warrant Apprehension Task Force was created in 2000, and Anne Arundel County Sheriff Ron Bateman has drawn headlines for stunts such as Valentine's Day candygrams used to catch unsuspecting fugitives.

While the initiative is unprecedented in Maryland, the U.S. Marshal for Maryland, Johnny L. Hughes, said the Safe Surrender program has shown "monumental results" in 16 major cities, including Washington, Philadelphia and Wilmington, Del.

The program condenses the criminal justice process, bringing together police, prosecutors, public defenders, judges and outreach services to clear the cases on the spot, if possible. Only cases from Baltimore and Baltimore County will be eligible, and could include such offenses as drinking in public, shoplifting or minor drug crimes.

Baltimore State's Attorney Patricia C. Jessamy said many of the cases might not be prosecutable, but remain in the system and can trigger an arrest. She recounted

the story of a woman who reported her car stolen, but who was arrested on the spot when police found she had an open warrant.

Jessamy said the event is not a "get out of jail free" card. Depending on the circumstances or severity of the crime, some could be set for trial.

The prosecutors office sent 500 post-cards to crime victims whose cases might come up, so that they can be part of the process. She said only two have responded.

"Some of these crimes are so minor that it really doesn't make a lot of sense to take up the time, effort and resources of the system to try and pursue them," Jessamy said.

Baltimore Police Commissioner Frederick H. Bealefeld III, whose officers made many of the arrests but also have to serve the warrants, said he endorses the plan.

"It frees up our resources to focus on the bad guys with guns, the people contributing to violence on our streets," he said. "It reinforces to the community we serve that our priority is violent offenders."

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