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< < Back

Program protects against desperate acts

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On Aug. 30, 2006, Officer Jonathan Schroeder approached the front door of a house in Cleveland, Ohio, to serve an arrest warrant. The suspect opened fire.

Schroeder, the father of a 10-month-old boy, died within minutes of the shooting. Six years earlier, another officer, Wayne Leon, died under similar circumstances.

More recently, Metro Nashville Officer Danita Marsh was ambushed and severely wounded while responding to a domestic violence incident, and Tennessee Highway Patrol Trooper Calvin Jenks was shot to death during a traffic stop.

These tragedies underscore one of the greatest threats to law enforcement officers — that desperate people commit desperate acts, sometimes with tragic consequences. This truth, and the tragic shooting of Officer Leon, led the U.S. marshal in Cleveland to create a program called Operation Fugitive Safe Surrender.

Through the marshal's leadership, a coalition of law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, public defenders, judges, community leaders and faith-based organizations worked together to offer fugitives the opportunity to voluntarily surrender to authorities. Believing fugitives might choose to surrender if they could do so safely, and that an inner-city church would be a safe haven, Cleveland officials converted Mount Sinai Baptist Church into a courthouse for four days in 2005.

The fugitives were not promised amnesty; they were merely told that prosecutors and judges would give consideration to their voluntary surrender. The results wowed even the greatest skeptics.

Ohio, Arizona successes

During just four days, 850 fugitives surrendered for a wide range of offenses. That success was repeated in Phoenix, last fall, when more than 1,300 fugitives surrendered.

The key to the program is trust, which is why the local clergy — the most trusted segment of our communities, is key. As the pastor of Cleveland's Mount Sinai Baptist Church, J.C. Matthews explained, "We've proven that community partnerships can successfully encourage felony fugitives to voluntarily and peacefully surrender — in huge numbers. We've protected our neighborhoods, kept our law enforcement officers from danger, silenced the naysayers, and given those who surrendered the opportunity to turn themselves around."

That is why local justice and community leaders are working to bring Fugitive Safe Surrender to Nashville. There are currently more than 38,000 outstanding warrants in the Nashville area. There lies the potential for 38,000 desperate acts.

We believe that for those who are running from the law, we can offer an alternative to the fear of being arrested, handcuffed and humiliated in front of friends and loved ones. We believe that we can lessen the dangers posed to police officers and household members when officers are forced to

execute arrest warrants at the homes and hideouts of fugitives. And we believe we can offer the hope of redemption and re-entry to those who choose to walk through the door of a church-turned-courthouse.

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