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Inspiration delivers fugitives to church

U.S. marshal gets idea for surrender program

By Phil Trexler
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U.S. Marshal Pete Elliott was exercising one day when a thought crossed his mind about the thousands of fugitives he's assigned to catch.

What came to the Aurora resident between beads of sweat has earned him the Academy Award of law enforcement as one of the nation's top cops.

It was Elliott's idea to create the Fugitive Safe Surrender program, which allows those wanted by police to surrender in the tranquility of a church. The notion was to make the arrests safe for the fugitive and the officer and let the clergy facilitate the meeting.

Some scoffed at Elliott's notion -- let's face it, a fugitive is a fugitive because he or she doesn't want to get caught.

But when the church doors opened in Cleveland in 2005, hundreds flocked inside. Those with arrest warrants were given a public defender and appeared before a judge. Most of the wanted left unwanted, their cases resolved or close to resolved, Elliott said. Only six remained in custody.

The program has gone national, from Phoenix to Nashville. It's scheduled to come to House of the Lord Church in Akron in June. The program is geared toward nonviolent offenders wanted by state and local law enforcement.

A Lakewood native born to a family of law-enforcement tradition, Elliott, 44, oversees the Marshal's Office for the northern tier of Ohio. He was one of 10 law-enforcement officers nationally who were recognized with the ``Top Cop'' award, presented annually by the National Association of Police Organizations.

Elliott was nominated by the Ohio Patrolman's Benevolent Association.

Q: So how did this idea come to you?

A: I wish I had a great story, but the truth is I was working on my elliptical when the idea came to me.

I've been in law enforcement 24 years and I didn't feel the community trusted police for the most part. I felt the community trusted their minister the most. The minister is the one who is there at birth, at marriages and at burials. They're with the people every day, building trust. So I thought we could bring the whole justice center and put it in a church and let the minister be the advocate for the program and allow these people to surrender in a comfortable environment. My real motivation for all this was the shooting death of (Cleveland Police) Officer Wayne Leon, who was killed by a fugitive.

Q: So what's the catch?

A: There's really no trick. They come in, they surrender, they see a judge and they're given a second chance at life. When we did it at Mount Sinai Church in Cleveland, 850 people turned out. And most left that same day.

Q: There are more than 50,000 fugitives in our area and more than 1 million nationwide. Why would a fugitive come in voluntarily?

A: It's very interesting. I talked to people who surrendered and many of them are just tired of running. They can't go to their son's baseball games, they're tired of always looking over their shoulder. Many just want to get it off their conscience and stop running. We want to encourage them to come to us because the philosophy behind every peaceful surrender is there's one less dangerous confrontation on the street. It's safer for our officers, our

neighborhoods and, actually, for the fugitives themselves and their families.

Q: Why has this program been successful?

A: It builds trust between the community and law enforcement. In this game, anybody can get hurt and we wanted to take out the desperation. Desperate people commit desperate acts, often with tragic consequences. This program takes the desperation out of the equation. They peacefully and voluntarily surrender without the risk of police kicking in a door.

Q: Unique approaches always have detractors. What was the reaction to your idea?

A: In Phoenix, they were taking bets on whether four or five people would show up. The sheriff out there is very tough on crime and didn't think this would work. At the end of four days, more than 1,400 people showed up.

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