

# News Article

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Church, police give fugitives second chance

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This summer, felony fugitives can surrender to law enforcement officers, consult with a court appointed attorney and speak to a judge at a church in Akron.

That may sound like a strange twist to some Hollywood production, but it's actually a faith-based initiative led nationally by the United States Marshals Service, called Fugitive Safe Surrender. The community re-entry initiative encourages people wanted for felony crimes to voluntarily surrender to the law.

"It's not a trick. This is an opportunity for a second chance for people who are running from the law. They can surrender in the safety of the church and, in most cases, go home the same day," said Bishop F. Josephus Johnson, pastor and founder of Akron's The House of the Lord.

Johnson's church is among those that will become a community courthouse in eight cities nationwide for four days in August.

Fugitive Safe Surrender was piloted last year in Cleveland at Mount Sinai Baptist Church.

On Friday, the Rev. C. Jay Matthews, senior pastor at Mount Sinai, held a press conference with U.S. Rep. Stephanie Tubbs Jones, D-Cleveland; Sen. Mike DeWine, R-Yellow Springs; Northern District of Ohio U.S. Marshal Peter J. Elliott; and Johnson. They talked about the success of last year's program, its expansion this year into eight cities across the nation, including Akron, and the proposed legislation that is on the table in Washington to fund the program.

Last week, Tubbs Jones introduced legislation that formally authorizes a federal appropriation of \$16 million to fund the Fugitive Safe Surrender Program within the Justice Department for the next three fiscal years.

U.S. Rep. Sherrod Brown, D-Lorain, is a co-sponsor on the House proposal. DeWine has introduced companion legislation in the Senate.

Grace Leon, the widow of Cleveland police officer Wayne Leon, who was killed in the line of duty by a fugitive in June 2000, was among those who gathered in the sanctuary of the church to show support for the program. The group also included law enforcement officers, church volunteers, attorneys and judges.

"This is an outstanding program. It doesn't provide amnesty but gives many individuals who have run afoul with the law a chance to come to a neutral setting and get on with their lives," said U.S. District Court Judge John R. Adams of Akron.

"When you're running from the law, you can't get a driver's license or employment. This program not only helps the community and law enforcement officers but the families of the fugitives and the fugitives themselves."

Adams said there are about 6,000 outstanding felony warrants in Summit County and he believes the program will reduce that number.

Last year, the program, which ran from Aug. 3 to 6 at Mount Sinai, netted more than 800 fugitives. That number included 324 felony fugitives, most of whom were wanted in connection with nonviolent crimes. A number of people charged with rape, felonious assault, burglary, robbery and high-level drug offenses also surrendered. Nonviolent felons were given bond, new court dates and released directly from the church. Those wanted for violent crimes and those with violent records were taken into custody.

The idea for the program was conceived by Elliott, who believes that fugitives reluctant to turn themselves in to law enforcement settings would surrender at houses of worship to faith-based leaders, if given the option. He called clergy "the heart of our success" and emphasized the importance of getting the congressional proposal passed.

"This bill is about making our streets safe," Elliott said. "For each fugitive that surrenders peacefully and voluntarily, we face one less dangerous confrontation on the streets. This is a program that protects our law enforcement officers and our communities."

The program is believed to be the first of its kind in the nation. Future plans include a re-entry component to help fugitives find a productive place in society and a clergy hot line for fugitives to call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to surrender.

"Because the church is a place of compassion and a place where we believe people can change their lives, it just makes sense for us to be a part of this partnership," Matthews said. "Our success last year proves that through this program, we can protect our neighborhoods, keep our law enforcement officers safe and give those who surrender an opportunity to turn their lives around."