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A time and a place to stop running

Fugitives have option to surrender in Akron this week

By Laura Ofobike, Beacon Journal chief editorial writer

No tricks. Just truth and honesty. Coming as they do from the U.S. Marshal for the Northern District of Ohio, those words are meant to be reassuring to the ears of Summit County fugitives.

Akron will host its first Fugitive Safe Surrender program this week from Wednesday through Saturday. The U.S. Marshals Service, in partnership with the offices of the Summit prosecutor and the sheriff, local attorneys, judges and clergy, is inviting residents who have outstanding felony and misdemeanor warrants and no record of violence to turn themselves in. From 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day, The House of the Lord, located at 1650 Diagonal Rd. in West Akron, will serve as a safe place for men and women who have been hiding from the law to step up with some dignity.

No tricks. The program is not a sting operation, not a clever snare, using the clergy to deliver gullible fugitives into the waiting arms of the law.

Truth and honesty. The program does not hand out pardons for crimes committed. It does not promise to relieve offenders of the consequences of their behavior. It offers only an opportunity for fugitives to stop digging themselves into a larger legal hole. It offers fugitives a site they have little reason to fear amid people from whom they can expect a little compassion. In the safety of a religious environment, the fugitives have the opportunity to consult with a lawyer, meet a judge, have their cases resolved or arrange court dates as their crimes demand.

The Fugitive Safe Surrender program was initiated in Cleveland in 2005, possibly the first such program in the nation. The success of that first invitation, when more than 850 fugitives turned themselves in over four days, confirmed that a second chance to start over, to get right with the law, was all the incentive some offenders needed.

A Bonnie-and-Clyde existence, after all, is more romantic on the screen than in the flesh. It gets old all too quickly, the constant alertness to stay ahead of the law, the fear that each approaching squad car could be the end of freedom, if a life on the lam could be called free.

Peter Elliot, U.S. Marshal for the Northern District of Ohio, said the idea for a program that encouraged offenders to surrender to people they trust in non-threatening surroundings came to him after a fugitive shot and killed Wayne Leon, a Cleveland police officer, in 2000. His concern was how to lower the risk of violence to police officers when they have to serve warrants or arrest fugitives.

Too many times it isn't only the law enforcement officers who become victims. Fugitives, cornered, can do stupid and desperate things, putting themselves as well as innocent people in grave danger. There have been times when neighbors or passers-by were caught in the crossfire as offenders tried to shoot their way out of trouble. There have been times, too, when fugitives have been cut down by police and suspicion has followed the explanations that they were resisting arrest.

In the absence of trust between those who enforce the law and those who are running from the law, neither can be assured of safety. Particularly disturbing, the lack of trust and a hostility to the justice system in general is widespread among young people in minority neighborhoods.

It is deeply saddening when violent criminals escape justice because to report on them to police is to be called "a snitch," considered more dishonorable than enabling a murderer, a rapist or a burglar to walk free.

Elliot was convinced that teaming up with churches and faith-based organizations would help temper the distrust and suspicion, the participation of religious leaders with respect and credibility in their area making it easier for fugitives to consider surrendering.

The marshal wasn't mistaken. Fugitives have stepped forward voluntarily at church sites in Cleveland, in Indianapolis and in Phoenix, where more than 1,300 surrendered during the four-day program last November.

It may not be quite the way ministers want their flock to return to church, but the church is a better place than many to start the climb up from a life in the underground. In Akron, the hope is many will heed the plea to stop by The House of the Lord.

U.S. Marshal Peter Elliot and Bishop Joey Johnson of The House of the Lord will be the speakers at the Akron Roundtable at noon on July 19. For information and tickets, call 330-836-7275.

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