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Fugitives get chance to give up

Surrendering at church may result in leniency

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Federal and state authorities are asking an estimated 70,000 fugitives in Maricopa County to go to church this week so they can surrender to the law.

Under a new program known as Fugitive Safe Surrender, those wanted on criminal warrants will receive "favorable consideration" if they turn themselves in this Wednesday through Saturday at Pilgrim Rest Baptist Church in central Phoenix, said David Gonzales, U.S. marshal for Arizona.

The church, at Jefferson and 14th streets, will serve as a one-stop justice spot where absconders can surrender to authorities, consult with lawyers and meet with a judge. The program will be open from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day.

Gonzales said the program gives offenders a chance to turn themselves in at a neutral site and clear their records.

"I have deputy marshals that are out kicking in doors every day, with countless foot chases and the use of non-deadly weapons," Gonzales said. "We're just looking at a better way to reduce the number of warrants in the county."

Gonzales said fugitives who have no serious prior crimes and are not wanted for violent offenses most likely will be processed and allowed to go home without spending time behind bars. Although there is no promise of leniency, he said, fugitives can eliminate the stress of running and the hassle of a public arrest.

For example, Gonzales said, a defendant wanted for felony theft who gets nabbed in a traffic stop would be handcuffed in front of family members and hauled off to jail. Under Safe Surrender, that same person probably would be processed at the church and released within hours, even minutes.

The initiative is designed to remove wanted felons from the streets at reduced cost and danger, and is being promoted with billboards, church fliers, TV ads and radio announcements.

Sheriff Joe Arpaio and County Attorney Andrew Thomas, who attended a Thursday news conference with Gonzales, stressed that defendants are not being given amnesty. Thomas said there are no promises of leniency, although prosecutors will take the voluntary surrender into consideration.

Federal, state and local authorities have vowed to form a warrants task force after the campaign ends. The task force would be in place for several weeks, going after fugitives who remain at large.

"The message is, we're going to get you anyway," Arpaio said.

Phoenix is the second U.S. city to try the program. In Cleveland last year, more than 840 suspects turned themselves in at a Baptist church during a four-day campaign. Although most who surrendered were wanted for non-violent misdemeanors, the list included 324 felony suspects. Among them were fugitives wanted for rape, assault, robbery and drug offenses.

When those who turned themselves in were asked why, Gonzales said, "The overwhelming response was they were tired of running. . . . They know they can't go home, they can't get a job. Every time they see a police car, their hearts race. It's stressful."

Authorities had no estimate as to how many may surrender in Phoenix.

Efforts to launch the campaign in several other cities have fizzled, according to published reports. In Camden, N.J., the Supreme Court banned judges from participating, at first because of concerns about separation of church and state. In Albuquerque, authorities decided they lacked resources. And in Akron, Ohio, Safe Surrender was postponed at the last minute because of financial problems.

Although the operation is staged at a church and supported by clergy, sponsors said it does not violate the constitutional mandate for separation of church and state.

Peter Elliott, the U.S. marshal in northern Ohio, said he created the program as an alternative to sting operations, where fugitives are duped and arrested. He pointed out that some suspects feel safe with ministers and religious centers.

"This is all about trust," Elliott said. "It is not a faith-based program. It is a law enforcement program that is faith-based in nature."

Doug Weiner, a former Cuyahoga County, Ohio, prosecutor who promotes the concept as a private consultant, said bipartisan sponsors have introduced multiyear funding measures for Safe Surrender in both houses of Congress.

He said the long-term goal is to offer church-based roundups regularly in cities nationwide.

"We are never going to replace the need for warrant sweeps," he said. "But this is another tool in the tool chest."

Reach the reporter at (602) 444-8874.

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