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## Arizona fugitives will get to surrender - in church

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If you are a fugitive in Maricopa County, the government wants you to go to church and surrender yourself.

Not to Jesus but to law officers who will be on hand at a makeshift courtroom along with judges, defense attorneys and prosecutors.

U.S. Marshal David Gonzales said the new tactic in rounding up wanted criminals will be employed this spring when authorities invite more than 80,000 Arizonans who are on the lam to turn themselves in at a house of God.

The program known as "Fugitive Safe Surrender" was first tried in Cleveland in October, when more than 800 suspects surrendered at a Baptist church transformed into an informal court for four days.

There is no offer of amnesty, Gonzales said, but those who surrender are promised "favorable consideration," which means they may be released without bail after appearing at the church and may be given leniency later at sentencing.

The unusual program also lets suspects give up in a sanctuary environment without endangering themselves, their families and neighbors. At the same time, it pays off for the government and public by removing fugitives from the streets without the cost or peril of warrant squads bashing down suspects' doors.

"This is a win-win situation for all of us," Gonzales said Friday during a planning session. "We're plowing new ground here in Phoenix, and I think we'll be setting the standard for the rest of the country."

Fugitive Safe Surrender was conceived by Peter J. Elliott, U.S. marshal for northern Ohio, as a faith-based project that would bring wanted non-violent felons in voluntarily rather than via sting operations or warrant squads.

At the brainstorming session, he described how Cleveland clergy spread word of the campaign and helped build trust among criminals. He said a media blitz appealed to relatives of fugitives, including children, who could be injured or traumatized during warrant arrests at residences.

"We crafted the message so family members would convince fugitives to turn themselves in," Elliott added. "This is, bottom line, a safer way of doing business."

The pilot program in Cleveland targeted 4,000 fugitives in a particular police district. Of the 844 who surrendered at Mount Sinai Baptist Church, 271 were felony fugitives. Most were wanted for non-violent crimes, but the turnout included suspects who had absconded from charges of rape, assault, burglary, robbery and drug offenses.

Only six of the Ohio fugitives were taken to jail immediately. Most were ordered to appear in court later, and more than 80 percent showed up on the appointed dates.

Elliott enlisted help from the Rev. C. Jay Matthews and other Cleveland ministers who called upon criminals to follow a moral path into the justice system. Churches distributed 3,000 handbills promoting the event. Mailers were sent to last-known addresses of fugitives.

Those who showed up at the church were assigned public defenders while non-profit organizations offered family counseling, child care and other services.

"It created probably a new level of trust between law enforcement and the community," said Matthews, who also is helping with the Arizona event. "Those who turned themselves in were overwhelmingly appreciative. The underlying thing was people were tired of running, tired of looking over their shoulders."

Although Safe Surrender will be based at a church, backers said it does not violate constitutional requisites for the separation of church and state.

Dawn Wyland, acting executive of the American Civil Liberties Union in Arizona, confirmed that civil libertarians in Ohio supported the program with only one concern: So many fugitives were being processed that public access was difficult because of the crowds.

"It was way more successful than they anticipated," Wyland said. "We're not seeing any problem with it at all, really."

Gonzales said the Phoenix event is planned over four days in May and likely will be at Pilgrims Rest Baptist Church, Jefferson and 14th streets.

Of the 80,000 arrest warrants on file in Maricopa County Superior Court, 38,350 are for felony fugitives, Gonzales said. The U.S. marshal said there are an additional 3,500 U.S. fugitives sought in Arizona and unknown numbers of misdemeanor warrants.

At the meeting, about two dozen justice-system officials traded questions about legal and practical challenges associated with such a monumental project: What happens if 3,000 fugitives turn themselves in? Can the courts and jails handle such glut? Will justice computers link up with operations at the church? What about undocumented immigrants? Who will pay for it all?

Gonzales said logistics can be worked out, and one fact remains constant: Fugitives who turn themselves in will be held accountable for their crimes.

"We're going to gear it toward felons," he added. "We know misdemeanor people will show up, and we'll just deal with them at the time."

Matthews, who is Black, said there were concerns in Cleveland about basing Safe Surrender in a church dominated by one ethnic group, but it turned out to be a non-issue.

"On the day we opened our doors, we had African-Americans, Whites, Hispanics. . . . I don't know what religions they were because we didn't ask," he said. "Their only question was, 'Are we going home today?'"

Safe Surrender will be promoted with a series of public service announcements featuring NBA star Shaquille O'Neal and Arizona Republican U.S. Sens. John McCain and Jon Kyl, among others.

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