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Church may be surrender site for some fugitives Non-violent suspects would have option



the Rev. Enoch Fuzz

By CHRISTIAN BOTTORFF
Staff Writer

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A new message that could be flowing this summer from behind some Nashville pulpits isn't centered on religion or making nice with one's neighbor. Instead, it will be a message from Metro police calling for people with criminal warrants to turn themselves in.

Operation Fugitive Safe Surrender, a new program being developed by Metro police in conjunction with federal law enforcement officials, would give special consideration to non-violent offenders who surrender directly at selected local churches.

If approved, non-violent offenders with outstanding warrants would be booked at the churches, get a new court date, and be set free without posting a bond.

There are more than 38,000 outstanding warrants in Davidson County, most involving non-violent offenders.

Many people accused of relatively minor crimes don't come forward because they're scared of the consequences, said the Rev. Enoch Fuzz, pastor at the Corinthian Missionary Baptist Church in Nashville.

"We need this," said Fuzz, who has been working with police to bring the program to Nashville. "I know lots of people who are afraid and intimidated about going to court when they get a simple traffic ticket for speeding.

"But when they do not show up to court, it turns into lots of fines. It turns into losing your driver's license. That turns into an economic burden to the person and community where we live."

Metro officials hope to roll out the operation in August, but the date is tentative because various levels of the criminal justice system in Nashville must sign off.

The money to pay for the program also has yet to win final approval from the U.S. Marshals Service.

Also unclear is how much leniency the offenders would get from county prosecutors.

"That's the idea, to give them some kind of consideration for turning themselves in," Davidson County District Attorney Torry Johnson said.

"We don't have a problem with that. But what that will actually look like is to be determined."

The planning would require a massive logistical undertaking to include Davidson County's sheriff, judges, probation officers and court clerks. Officials will have to consider how to transform a church

into a temporary component of the justice system.

Other cities use program

Nashville would follow several other U.S. cities that already conduct "Safe Surrender" operations.

In Cleveland, more than 840 people, including 324 with felony warrants, voluntarily surrendered at a Baptist church.

In Maricopa County, Ariz., where Phoenix is located, more than 1,300 people surrendered over four days.

Maricopa County Superior Court judges were on hand to handle the cases, and suspects were able to meet with public defenders on site.

Local authorities are hoping for similar success.

"What Operation Safe Surrender does is encourages people to peacefully surrender, and take care of an outstanding warrant, and prevent the day that a police officer has to come to a home at 5 o'clock in the morning and affect an arrest in front of family members and children," Metro police spokesman Don Aaron said.

"This is an opportunity for persons to come in, surrender, and take care of their business, in a very straightforward fashion."

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