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Let's revisit local safe surrender programs

When police and deputies pound on front doors, only two or three inches of wood or metal separates them from some of society's most dangerous people. People high or drunk. People defending a criminal enterprise. People desperate to stay out of prison.

Law officers will always have to serve warrants. If most departments did nothing but serve warrants, they still couldn't serve them all.

But some departments across the country have created so-called safe surrender programs, which help reduce the strain on an overburdened justice system.

During these multi-day events, fugitives and others sought on warrants can surrender to a corps of volunteer clergy at a church or some other neutral site temporarily transformed into a courthouse.

We should have more of them. They seem to work.

According to the U.S. Marshals Service Web site, 561 people surrendered to authorities in Nashville last year, 530 did so in Washington, D.C., and 1,581 did so in Memphis.

Sedgwick County Undersheriff Bob Hinshaw said the county had about 11,300 outstanding warrants as of May 1.

Wichita sponsored such a program in 2006. It coaxed 1,725 people out of the shadows, and the city collected \$129,402.

In these "peaceful surrender" or "safe surrender" initiatives, clergy play the key role of filling the trust gap between communities and police departments.

The Rev. Titus James, pastor of North Heights Christian Church, said he could support such a program.

"I'd like to see some grace and mercy on the part of law enforcement," James said. "If they agreed to a reduction of fees and fines, that could be a tremendous bargain for your justice, even for your freedom. And the government might collect money they wouldn't otherwise collect."

The typical candidate for these programs, according to press reports, is wanted for a nonviolent felony or misdemeanor. They are tired of looking over their shoulders and frustrated with their inability to get a job or drive a car without worry of arrest.

The number of surrenders may not seem like much, but every person who surrenders and is released is one less person occupying an expensive jail cell.

An appealing idea, considering that Wichita owes the county nearly \$870,000 for housing people arrested on city charges. So far, the county has collected less than \$16,000 from Wichita and 16 other cities that it claims owe it money.

And then there are costs that simply defy measurement.

Three years ago, Greenwood County Sheriff Matt Samuels died serving a pair of warrants on a man wanted on burglary and theft charges as well as a parole violation.

The shooter, Scott Cheever, sentenced to death in January, had barricaded himself inside the residence after shooting Samuels and had been bingeing on meth for days.

Law enforcement officials say that along with domestic violence calls, serving warrants is the most dangerous work they do.

Anything we can do to lower the risks for law enforcement, build faith in the system or prevent people from being pushed to the point of desperation can only make our community safer.

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