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Church to fugitives: Surrender in safety

100,000 who face outstanding warrants offered chance to give up

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Thousands of people on the run from the law soon will get a chance to turn themselves in peacefully at a Richland County church.

Bible Way Church of Atlas Road will transform into a satellite courthouse in a couple of weeks — becoming the 10th site of the federally-funded Fugitive Safe Surrender program in the nation, said Tim Stec, a deputy U.S. marshal based in Columbia.

More than 100,000 people with outstanding warrants in Richland and Lexington counties can surrender between July 9 and 12, start resolving their cases and move on with their lives.

"The goal is to get warrants cleared up so people can be reintegrated into the community," Stec said. "In some cases, the whole case can be adjudicated that day. We're gonna get people through as quickly as we can."

The program targets non-violent fugitives in the two counties, Stec said, but anyone — including murder suspects — can surrender.

Most nonviolent offenders go home the same day after their case is resolved or a new court date is set, Stec said.

Richland County Sheriff Leon Lott began working two years ago to bring the program to the Midlands. "It will help turn people's lives around," he said.

When a fugitive surrenders, Lott said, it is often viewed favorably by law enforcement, prosecutors and judges.

Authorities are hoping between 1,500 and 2,000 fugitives will surrender at Bible Way.

"If they don't show up and they don't take advantage of the program," Lott said, "then we're coming after them."

Calvin Jackson, chief operating officer of Bible Way Church, said fugitives can't find jobs or get a driver's license because of minor offenses they could have already resolved. "We're saying we're gonna help empower people to get back on their feet and be productive citizens."

The Safe Surrender program also helps keep law enforcement officers, fugitives and the community safe, said the Rev. C. Jay Matthews, pastor of Mt. Sinai Baptist Church in Cleveland, Ohio — site of the first Safe Surrender program.

In August 2005, about 850 people turned themselves in at that church on a range of criminal violations, U.S. marshals said.

The most recent Safe Surrender operation, in Detroit earlier this month, resulted in more than 7,000 people turning themselves in — more than the previous eight operations combined.

Peter J. Elliott, U.S. marshal for the northern district of Ohio, created the program in 2004 — prompted by the murder of a Cleveland police officer by a fugitive in 2000.

Matthews, who is advising local authorities on the program, has spoken to hundreds of fugitives who have surrendered. Many told him they were constantly looking over their shoulder.

In some cases, they skipped family gatherings and Little League games, he said, fearing police would catch up with them.

When they got their cases resolved, he said, "there were people dancing, shouting, singing.
"One of the byproducts is a better bridge of trust between community and law enforcement."
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