

Surrender at S.C. church without going to jail

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COLUMBIA -- Fugitives who turn themselves in at a Columbia church this week can talk to an attorney, see a judge and even get job counseling without having to spend time behind bars.

The U.S. Marshal's Service is bringing its Fugitive Safe Surrender program to Bible Way Church of Atlas Road from Wednesday through Saturday. South Carolina is the 10th stop for the program, which has encouraged more than 13,000 people to turn themselves in since the program began in Cleveland in 2005.

The program brings judges, defense attorneys and prosecutors together so they can all take a look at the case. Most nonviolent offenders should be able to leave the church with a court date and a lawyer. Others may have their charges dropped or a deal worked out after a judge reviews the case.

"There may be a fine, may be community service, but you will probably leave that building without looking at time served," church spokeswoman Nicole Holland said.

Holding the program at a church may make people more comfortable about turning themselves in, said Lexington County Sheriff James Metts.

"A lot of people are afraid to turn themselves in at the sheriff's department for whatever reason," said Metts, who stressed several times this isn't an amnesty program.

Once the program ends Saturday, deputies in both counties will begin a massive sweep for fugitives and those people will be put in jail to awaiting hearings without the additional help being offered by the Fugitive Safe Surrender program, said Richland County Sheriff Leon Lott.

Lott said the program also protects his deputies. "For every fugitive that chooses to voluntarily and peacefully surrender, law enforcement officers and residents face one less potentially dangerous confrontation on the streets," he said.

State Sen. Darrell Jackson said Bible Way Church, where he is a pastor, decided to help out with the program after hearing some of the success stories from other cities. A church in Detroit had more than 6,500 people turn themselves in at a program in June, while similar efforts in Akron, Ohio, Memphis, Tenn., and Phoenix have each brought in more than 1,000 people.

The program includes job counselors and representatives from the state Department of Motor Vehicles because fugitives often avoid renewing driver's licenses or looking for a job because they fear their warrants will be discovered during background checks, Jackson said.

"These people can now get on with their life," the Hopkins Democrat said.

Once the fugitives are processed, the church plans to have people in the parking lot to discuss spiritual matters with them.

"We view the church as more than just a place to go Sunday morning," Jackson said. "It ought to be a haven, a place for people to go to get their lives back on track."

Up to 80 percent of those turning themselves in say having the program at the church made them feel comfortable, said Kent State University professor Dan Flannery, who collects data on the program for the Marshal's Service to review.

"They feel by holding it in a church that it isn't a trick," Flannery said. "You can turn yourself in with some sense of safety and security."

Follow-up studies have found more than 90 percent of fugitives who have to return to court show up, a significant improvement over regular defendants, Flannery said.

And about 20 percent of the people who show up have no warrants out for them at all.

"They have been avoiding working or other things because they are scared to be arrested for no reason," Flannery said. "You actually clear those cases too, because you give them peace of mind."