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U.S. marshal and community unite to safely bring in fugitives at church

Dozens take steps to move on

Akron man gets help of ex-officer, is among 136 who turn selves in

By Colette M. Jenkins
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Mark Foster stopped running from the law on Wednesday.

“Since I caught my second case, getting busted with marijuana, I have been trying to stay out of the way,” said Foster, 41, of Akron. “But since then, I’ve got summons -- three or four times -- to go to court. I just didn’t go because I didn’t want to go to jail. I’m tired of running. It’s time for me to get my life in order.”

Foster took the first step toward a second chance on Wednesday when he showed up at The House of the Lord on Diagonal Road in Akron to turn himself in to law enforcement officials as part of the U.S. Marshals Service Fugitive Safe Surrender Program.

The federal program, piloted in Cleveland two years ago, encourages nonviolent felony offenders to turn themselves in at local churches. The goal is to avoid dangerous confrontations with authorities.

Foster said he has been trying to avoid any contact with law enforcement officers for the past three years. But in an interesting twist, it was a retired Akron police officer who informed him of the program, and that same officer, John Lewis, actually drove him to the church to turn himself in.

“I found myself homeless, and he let me stay in one of his rental properties. I had been doing some remodeling stuff for him, and he said he wanted to help me get back on my feet,” Foster said. “He started helping me get some things in order, and he found out I had a couple of outstanding warrants.”

Lewis, who walked with Foster through the nearly five-hour process, said that he knows Foster as a hard worker who wants to do the right thing. He said he wanted to help Foster clear his record so he could get on with his life.

“If anybody deserves a second chance, it’s him. He’s honest. He takes care of my property,” Lewis said. “I know he can be successful. He just needs to get this behind him.”

That’s exactly what Foster did.

Foster was greeted about 9 a.m. in the parking lot of the church by volunteers, wearing blue Fugitive Safe Surrender T-shirts, who directed him to the entrance. His personal belongings were placed in a plastic bag and handed to him after he passed through a metal detector. He was then given paperwork to fill out and sign -- a warrant information sheet, an intake interview sheet and an intake survey consent form.

After turning in the papers, he sat in the church gym, waiting for law enforcement and court officials to call his name. Then, he took a mug shot, was interviewed by a Summit County Sheriff’s deputy and was fingerprinted.

From there, he moved to the courtroom of Akron Municipal Judge Eve Belfance -- located in the church nursery -- and met with his appointed attorney, Michael Altvater, with the University of Akron Law Clinic. After discussing his case, the two went before the judge, who agreed to clear Foster’s two warrants and sentenced him to 250 hours of community service.

After having his records updated by employees of the clerk of courts, who were located in a classroom at the church, Foster headed to the release room and left the church shortly after 2 p.m. The warrants had been issued for Foster’s failure to appear in court on two charges of drug possession.

Most go home same day

Like Foster, most of the fugitives who surrender will go home the same day, with their warrants disposed of. Some are given bond and a new court date is set. Those wanted for violent crimes are taken into custody.

“At the end of the day, this is going to make the streets safer by having less people out there with warrants,” said U.S. Marshal Peter J. Elliott of the Northern District of Ohio. “I can’t speak for the rest of the week, but the response has been unbelievable on the first day. We’ve never had as many people surrender on the first day as we have in Akron.”

Akron, which attracted 136 fugitives on the first day, is the fourth community to implement the program. The pilot program in Cleveland resulted in 850 people surrendering in August 2005 over four days. In the Phoenix program in November 2006, 1,320 people surrendered and in April, 530 people gave themselves up in Indianapolis.

The first day numbers were 60 in Cleveland, 122 in Phoenix and 82 in Indianapolis.

Volunteers credited

Elliott, who conceived the idea for the community re-entry initiative, attributes the success of the program to the community’s trust in clergy and faith-based institutions.

“If given the option, fugitives who are reluctant to surrender in law enforcement settings will surrender at houses of worship,” Elliott said. “Clergy are the heart of our success. Volunteers are the backbone. It takes the entire community to make this work.”

More than 100 community volunteers are joining with law enforcement officers, defense attorneys, prosecutors, judges, justice system workers and officials from the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles to turn the nondenominational church into a courthouse through Saturday.

Akron is the first community to include the BMV to help fugitives with information on how to obtain a driver’s license once warrants have been cleared.

The local program also included representatives from Urban Ounce of Prevention and Oriana House Inc. to help fugitives find employment and resolve other re-entry programs. A nursery was also provided for children who accompanied their parents to the church.

Spreading the word

Fugitive Safe Surrender runs from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day through Saturday. Individuals can also obtain information through the U.S. Marshals Service hot line, 330-643-2245.

“The church is here to help people and these are people who want help and need help,” said Bishop F. Josephus Johnson, pastor and founder of The House of the Lord. “We just opened our doors. This is a community effort.”

Johnson and Elliott both said they were impressed by the number of people who said they heard about the program from someone else. They said word of mouth will likely be one of the best ways to communicate what is going on.

Foster said he plans to be one of those word-of-mouth ambassadors for the program.

“I picked up a flyer to give to somebody else that I know. I’m going to tell her she needs to come and turn herself in,” Foster said. “I wasn’t sure when I walked in here today that I would be walking out with a clean record. I’m going to tell everybody I know that this is a worthwhile thing and they should come.”

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