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## Fugitives answer call to surrender

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By **Dennis Wagner and Lindsey Collom, USA TODAY**

PHOENIX — Sean White, wanted on criminal warrants for a probation violation and failure to appear in court, went to church Wednesday morning to get right with the law.

The 32-year-old man was among the 120 suspects who turned themselves in during the first four hours of Fugitive Safe Surrender.

The program, which ends Saturday, basically is an invitation from federal and state authorities who are telling fugitives they might receive "favorable consideration" by turning themselves in at a makeshift justice center at Pilgrim Rest Baptist Church.

Doug Weiner, a former Cuyahoga County, Ohio, prosecutor and co-founder of Fugitive Safe Surrender, said the long-term goal is to conduct programs nationwide. Plans already are underway for ones in Indianapolis; Rochester, N.Y.; Akron, Ohio; and Richmond, Va.

David Gonzales, U.S. Marshal for Arizona, said the program gives suspects a chance to deal with criminal warrants at a neutral site, which cuts costs for the public and reduces the chance of a dangerous situation for law officers.

### Avoiding handcuffs

Defendants who show up at the Phoenix church find public defenders to represent them and judges to conduct hearings. Often, when fugitives are caught in traffic stops or tracked down by agents, they face the humiliation of being handcuffed in front of family and the hassle of going straight to jail.

Under Safe Surrender, Gonzales said, most of those wanted for non-violent offenses will be processed within hours and released without going behind bars. The fugitives who turned themselves in Wednesday morning were suspects in cases involving drunken driving, disorderly conduct and failure to pay fines.

A federal Office of Justice Programs grant for \$600,000 is financing the development of Fugitive Safe Surrender. The grant is being supplemented with money, manpower and equipment from state and local agencies. Gonzales said he expects the effort in Phoenix to cost about \$75,000.

"We think it's a win-win situation for the community," Gonzales said.

The Safe Surrender concept was first tried 13 months ago in Cleveland. Over a four-day period, more than 840 people visited a church to resolve criminal warrants. Although most were wanted for non-violent misdemeanors, the lineup included 324 felony suspects, with "some wanted for rape, robbery, assault and drug offenses," said Peter Elliott, the U.S. Attorney for northern Ohio.

Elliott said he hit upon the idea for Safe Surrender last year. He said he realized suspects might turn themselves in if they could do so safely, and he figured churches would be good safe havens.

When the suspects in Cleveland were asked why they surrendered, Gonzales said, "The overwhelming response was they were tired

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of running. ... It's stressful."

Sean White had been on the run since 2002, when he walked away from a work-release program. At the time, White was 20 days into a 40-day DUI sentence at a Maricopa County jail. It was the wrong decision, he said, and life hasn't been easy since.

White lost a construction job because his driver's license was suspended, he said, and lack of income led his family of five to move from a three-bedroom home to a pay-by-week hotel.

Even more, he said, the main motivation for surrendering is to help solve his half brother's murder. Robert Dickey, 40, was driving to work when someone he stopped to help along the roadway fatally stabbed him in June 2005, White said. He said he hasn't been involved for fear of arrest.

"It's pretty much weighed me down every single day," White said. "Whatever I have to serve, pay, I want to get it over with so I can get on with my life."

### Earn goodwill, but not amnesty

In Maricopa County, where there are about 70,000 criminal warrants waiting to be served, according to Gonzales and county law enforcement, the operation was preceded by a media blitz featuring newspaper ads, church fliers and public service announcements on radio and television. In the days leading up to the roundup, Gonzales said, the marshals' phone line was "ringing off the hook" with calls from fugitives wanting details.

Gonzales, along with Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio and Attorney Andrew Thomas, stressed that defendants are not being offered amnesty — only a promise that prosecutors will consider the voluntary surrender.

White said he believes that turning himself in helped his case: He was free to leave after the proceedings. A county commissioner at the church quashed one of his warrants; the other will be addressed in a municipal court.

On Wednesday, Gonzales said he was surprised by the turnout so early in the program. "I thought it would start off slow and build up. This is good," he said. "It just shows the desperation."

Despite the program's initial success in Ohio, there have been problems. In Albuquerque, authorities abandoned plans because they lacked resources. And a surrender program in Camden, N.J., was canceled after the state Supreme Court balked because of concerns about mixing church and state.

Elliott and Gonzales said that while ministers support the program and churches provide a venue, Fugitive Safe Surrender doesn't involve preaching or proselytizing.

"This is all about trust," Elliott said. "It's not a faith-based program. It is a law enforcement program that is faith-based in nature."

*Wagner and Collom report daily for The Arizona Republic in Phoenix.*

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