

Hundreds surrender to police in special program

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Violators now see clearer futures

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Eric Dean got up early to celebrate his mother's birthday, but didn't have anything of monetary value to give her. What he was about to do, however, would mean more to her than anything money could buy.

At 2 a.m., Dean, 41, began the 10-mile walk from Landover, Md., to Bible Way Church in northwest Washington to voluntarily surrender to federal and local authorities after a year of ducking, hiding and not being able to work as a wanted man.

Dean was one of more than 500 former fugitives who turned themselves into authorities last week as part of the "Fugitive Safe Surrender Project," a first time program in D.C. to allow nonviolent offenders to surrender without severe repercussions.

Violators came from as far as New York and South Carolina to turn themselves in. Some came in wheelchairs, others used canes. Some sported gray hair and had false teeth. The oldest to surrender was 74; the youngest was 17. The longest outstanding warrant satisfied was from 24 years ago.

The project, which ran for three days, was a collaborative venture between local and federal government agencies and faith-based organizations to get some of the estimated 28,000 Washington fugitives to surrender.

Dean, who had been on probation, said he received a call from his probation officer about two weeks ago that he had an outstanding warrant from 2005. He said he was told that if he participated in the safe surrender project, things might look better for him. Dean said he and his mother began to pray about the matter, and he decided to take a chance.

"God knocked on my door at 2 o'clock in the morning that day and I just started walking," Dean said from inside Bible Way Church. "My belief in God and the prayers of my mother are what brought me here."

Dean walked out of the church with a clean slate and new hope.

"For years, my life has been miserable," he said. "Now I have been given a second chance that I will never forget."



Participating in the program were the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA), the U.S. Marshal, the district attorney's office, Washington's Superior Court, the Department of Corrections, New Bethel Baptist Church and Scripture Cathedral.

CSOSA director Paul Quander said he was pleased to see criminal justice organizations working with community groups and churches to make the event happen.

"This was one of the most gratifying experiences of my professional life," Quander said.

According to Len Sipes, a CSOSA spokesman, the vast majority of people who surrendered walked out of the church with a clean slate, a new court date or some form of supervision.

About 100 more offenders surrendered or made arrangements to surrender directly to the Superior Court during this period, he said.

The program cost a little more than \$200,000 and hundreds of hours of volunteer service.

Officials said of the 530 who surrendered to the program, only 10 were arrested - three for domestic violence, five for escape from a correctional facility, one for armed robbery and one for felony assault.

Fifteen percent found that they were not wanted at all, authorities said. About 30 percent were wanted only for traffic violations.

When Angela Wilson first heard about the project a week ago, she pleaded with her son to surrender over the protests of other family members.

"I was called all kinds of names by my family," Wilson said tearfully. "But I figured, this is my son and his future. I wanted the best for him and running and hiding for the rest of his life was not the answer." Rashaad Wilson, 19, listened to his mother's advice.

Shortly after turning himself in and finishing with the paperwork, he spun his mother around and with a boyish grin stretched across his face said, "I'm free. I'm free."

Wilson still has to complete a 15-month probation with a global position satellite device monitoring his movements. In return, however, he says he can now begin to resume his life.

"I can go back to school and be somebody," he said. "I can go to work. Thanks, mom."

"Don't thank me," his mother replied. "Thank God."

Sipes said that many of the program's participants also saw surrendering as a chance to stop living under a cloud.

"If someone has an outstanding warrant, he or she is unable to work or collect social security benefits or participate in any programs we offer in the District," he said. "It's just not worth it."

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