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U.S. Marshals Let Fugitives Come to Them, in Church

By THEO EMERY

Since March, David Moran has been looking over his shoulder. Not a day passes, he said, that he does not think about the arrest warrant issued after he missed a court hearing for driving without a license.

On Friday, Mr. Moran took an opportunity from the United States Marshals Service to remedy his situation by showing up at a church here where hundreds of people with outstanding warrants have surrendered.

"You never know when you're going to be picked up," said Mr. Moran, 41, as he sat on a folding chair in a waiting area with his wife, Penny. "I need a fresh start."

The program, called Fugitive Safe Surrender, is the fifth effort of its kind by the Marshals Service, which works with local police officers, churches, public defenders and judges. The program helps ease court backlogs and gives nonviolent fugitives a chance to resolve their court problems in a neutral setting.

Some 1.2 million people nationwide are considered fugitives because of outstanding warrants, said Peter J. Elliott, the United States marshal for northern Ohio. About half are for nonviolent crimes; it is that group the program hopes to bring in to sort out their legal woes, which can stem from problems as simple as a missed court date.

After a Cleveland police officer was shot to death in 2000 trying to arrest a man wanted for a parole violation, Mr. Elliott came up with the program as a way to prevent confrontations between fugitives and the police.

"That's the bottom line," he said. "We don't have to go kicking in these doors to find these people that are wanted. They come to us."

Since August 2005, about 4,000 people have surrendered during such programs, in Phoenix; Indianapolis; Cleveland; Akron, Ohio; and Nashville. In Nashville, where there are about 38,000 outstanding warrants in the county courts, more than 550 people turned themselves in from Wednesday to Saturday, the last day they could do so.

The program transplants court apparatus into the safe confines of a church. Fugitives with lesser crimes -- traffic violations or minor drug offenses, for example -- work out a plea deal with public defenders and prosecutors, then go before a judge. Typically, the judge dismisses the warrant, and the defendant goes home.

In felony cases, a judge generally sets a new court date and the person goes free without posting bond, although more than three dozen fugitives in Nashville were arrested and taken into custody because of the seriousness of their crimes.

The church in Nashville, Galilee Missionary Baptist, was transformed into a bustling legal complex. Inside the door, a sheriff's deputy asked arrivals, "Are you here to turn yourself in?"

On the other side of a metal detector, church volunteers held bundles of wristbands: red for fugitives, green for accompanying family members or friends. Other volunteers walked the surrendering men and women through the system, collecting information and delivering it to court clerks, then taking them to be fingerprinted and photographed.

The scene in the fellowship hall was one of noisy chaos; children scampered among the chairs, and volunteers handed out bottled water and chips.

In the quieter sanctuary, a group of people waited in the pews to meet with a public defender. Among them was Jerice Bryant, 25, who sang quietly as she sat with her sisters, Alexandria, 26, and Jesika, 20.

Ms. Bryant said she had missed a court date over a charge of driving with a suspended license and learned of the warrant a few weeks ago.

"I was going to go turn myself in at the courthouse, but then I heard about this," Ms. Bryant said. "I felt more comfortable turning myself in at a church."

Down the hall, a classroom had been turned into a court, where a judge, Daniel B. Eisenstein, sat behind a wide desk. He accepted a plea from Mr. Moran, who agreed to get his license or perform community service.

Judge Eisenstein also presided over Ms. Bryant's case.

Facing the judge, she agreed to a new court date, and he dismissed the warrant. "Don't drive now, please," the judge admonished her. "No, sir," she answered.

Outside the church, she danced a little jig. "I recommend they do this everywhere," she said. As her sisters whooped and laughed, she added, "Thank God for it. Thank God."