

FUGITIVE SAFE SURRENDER

More than 1,200 fugitives surrender during the four-day program, clearing up more than 5,700 warrants, authorities say.

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BY LARA BRECKLE lbrenckle@patriot-news.com



JOHN C. WHITEHEAD, The Patriot-News

Tony James of Harrisburg and his son, Teyon James, 3, wait to see the judge at the Fugitive Safe Surrender program Saturday. Tony James was wanted for child support and traffic violations.

At first, Riquita Wilson said she wasn't sure she could trust information floating around her Harrisburg neighborhood that there was a program offering people with outstanding warrants the chance to turn themselves in without fear of arrest.

But then, she saw Fugitive Safe Surrender highlighted on the local news, Wilson said.

Wilson said she knew this might be her chance to clear up a pair of charges that had her worrying every time she got in the car or stepped onto the street.

With papers in her hand declaring that she'd shown up in time to take advantage of the program, Wilson said she's ready to move on with her life.

"It's a relief," Wilson, 28, said. "It was something hanging high over my head."

She was one of the more than 450 people who streamed into the parking lot of Zion Assembly Church in uptown Harrisburg Saturday -- the final day of the program.

During the four-day event, roughly 1,250 people, most of them wanted for misdemeanors, got the chance to resolve legal issues without fear of arrest, U.S. Marshal Michael Regan said.

They were processed by more than 200 volunteers, including judges, district attorneys and public defenders, organizers said.

Dauphin County Sheriff's deputy Daine Arthur said it was so busy Saturday that they stopped putting people before the judges by noon and started issuing vouchers as proof of surrender.

Those who received vouchers are guaranteed the same treatment by the courts as if they had been adjudicated during the program, Regan said.

The surrender also allowed people to negotiate for fine waivers or for probation.

More than 5,795 outstanding warrants were cleared from the books, Regan said.

The program's benefits are immense, he said.

Officer safety is now better in the city, Regan said.

If a wanted person is stopped by police for a traffic violation, that sometimes can devolve into a car or foot chase, endangering the officer and the lives of bystanders, he said.

"It's a community outreach as well," Regan said. "The relationship between the police and perpetrator was not adversarial. There was a lot of talking, high-fiving."

There were only two arrests, chief deputy U.S. Marshal Don Heemer said. Those people had charges serious enough to require immediate detention.

However, Heemer said, it would be taken into consideration that they surrendered.

Joe Baumgartner Sr. of Harrisburg came to clear a warrant stemming from more than \$2,000 in unpaid parking tickets.

A bad end to a relationship with a woman with whom he purchased a vehicle led to the tickets, he said.

He said he didn't find out about them until the car was booted a week after the relationship ended.

By taking part in the program, Baumgartner said he hoped to be able to clear up the fines as well.

"It's good," he said. "I'll get back on track with this."

