

Editorial Board Opinion

For fugitives, the right kind of break

By Editorial, Published: August 18

WILLIE JONES was a small-time drug dealer and addict charged with heroin distribution when he skipped a pre-trial hearing in 2006 and disappeared into the shadows. Bad move. A bench warrant was issued for his arrest, and Mr. Jones, a resident of the District, began living in fear each day that U.S. marshals or D.C. police officers would come knocking at his door.

These days Mr. Jones holds a full-time job and appears in public in coat and tie — not an orange jumpsuit — telling interviewers how he got his life back on track. The key to his turnaround: a little-known federal program that cuts nonviolent fugitives a break, briefly, providing they take the initiative and the responsibility by coming forward to face justice.

Authorized by Congress in 2006 and led by the U.S. Marshals Service, Fugitive Safe Surrender debuted in three American cities, including the District, in 2007. That's when Mr. Jones turned himself in, becoming the first of several hundred D.C. fugitives to do so. A Superior Court judge, taking a chance, gave him a suspended sentence and 18 months of probation.

The chance paid off. Last weekend, Mr. Jones was on hand at Superior Court to offer his encouragement for the program's second round in the District — three consecutive Saturdays this month of officially sanctioned leniency.

More than 225 people with outstanding bench warrants showed up at Superior Court last Saturday. Most were fugitives who had skipped court dates on charges of drunk driving, drug possession, minor gun charges, driving on a suspended license and other second-tier crimes. Some came from as far as Florida, Tennessee and Nevada. One had been a fugitive since 1978. Hundreds more are expected this Saturday and next.

In a way, the program makes a virtue of necessity. With a backlog of more than 13,000 outstanding warrants, U.S. marshals and D.C. police sensibly prioritize violent felons. People charged with low-

grade, nonviolent felonies and misdemeanors might take years to catch, if they are caught at all. By dangling a carrot — the promise of favorable treatment — Safe Surrender sweeps up hundreds of fugitives who have fallen through the cracks and gives them a second chance. For those who remain on the lam, there is the threat of arrest at home, at work or on the street.

Safe Surrender is no amnesty program, and no guarantees are offered. Last Saturday, five of those who turned themselves in were locked up. Some others were given new court dates. But for many, cases were dismissed or otherwise resolved. And for those who did heed the advance publicity and show up, there were Safe Surrender T-shirts, words of encouragement, and officials from the city's drug treatment, health services and employment agencies ready to help.

"You've got a much better likelihood of leaving through the front door if you walk in through the front door than if you don't," Chief Judge Lee Satterfield told us.

In the national debate about crime, zero tolerance is a nice slogan, and compassion is not much in vogue. Safe Surrender, which is limited in time, scope and eligibility, provides no assurance that every low-grade criminal will follow Willie Jones's example and wind up on the right path. And only a tiny percentage of eligible fugitives take advantage of the opportunity they are offered.

Still, the program, which has now been tried in nearly 20 cities, is a reminder that second chances can pay off.