

## Court program allows fugitives to clear their names

By Victor Zapana and Clarence Williams, Published: August 20

Robert Brown needed an Ohio driver's license, so he traveled more than six hours Saturday morning to see a judge in D.C. Superior Court.

Brown had an outstanding warrant in the District for a 1999 traffic violation that stood in the way of his receiving the license, so his fiancée had to drive him and their 2-year-old 350 miles so he could settle the matter.

"They've been holding it over my head for 12 years," he said.

Brown is one of 179 people who on Saturday participated in the "Safe Surrender" program, which officially started Aug. 13. Many who visited the courthouse Saturday left with dismissed charges or terminated paroles.

The program, which will be offered for the last time this year next Saturday, targets people with non-violent felonies and misdemeanors. Roughly 12,000 of about 14,000 outstanding warrants and parole cases are eligible, said Terry G. Fred, the assistant chief deputy U.S. marshal for D.C. Superior Court.

Before Saturday, 294 people visited the courthouse to participate, and family members have reported that at least 10 people with outstanding warrants have died, court officials said.

In 2007, the last time the city offered the program, more than 500 people participated, and fewer than 2 percent were held in jail after the appearance, D.C. Superior Court Chief Judge Lee F. Satterfield said.

District officials decided to reintroduce Safe Surrender this year in part because of the risks involved with apprehending fugitives. Fred said 12 law enforcement officers, including two deputy marshals, have died this year while trying to take people into custody.

The program also prevents that awkward moment when officers visit people's homes, knock on doors and disturb family members and neighbors of the people for whom they are searching.

The approach is a stark contrast from tactics used about 20 years ago, Fred said. In a District-area sting at the time, U.S. marshals sent letters offering free Redskins tickets to those with outstanding warrants. When people showed up to claim the tickets, they were arrested, Fred said.

"It scarred this community," he said.

Satterfield said city officials wanted to provide an opportunity for people to "do the right thing."

"There is a better chance of you walking out the front door of a courthouse if you walk in the front door of the courthouse," he said. "It's never too late to come in."

At the courthouse, dozens of people entered courtrooms 114 and 119, while several workers in blue Safe Surrender T-shirts scurried about. Representatives from Unity Health Care and the city's health, mental health and employment services departments gave presentations to those waiting their turn.

In Courtroom 114, 53-year-old Leslie Perkins, of Northeast settled two prostitution charges. On parole for a different crime, Perkins said she is studying business administration in Maryland she hopes to become a social worker.

"It was just a bogus charge. Someone asked me for a date, and I asked, 'How much money you got?'" she said. "Now I'm just trying to be drug-free, go to school."

Tyrone Jackson later entered the same courtroom to plead guilty to illegal possession of marijuana. Prosecutors said he was walking along Southern Avenue in Southeast with a rolled cigar that tested positive for THC, the active ingredient in marijuana.

In light of the plea agreement, Satterfield sentenced Jackson to six months of unsupervised probation. Jackson can now move to North Carolina to live with his sister and apply for a job with a printing company in Durham.

"With a warrant hanging over your head, you really can't do nothing," he said. "What made me come back was I needed to work. I'm 31 years old. I can't just be walking around unemployed."

Sporting a yellow polo shirt, Brown arrived at the courthouse a little after noon and left around 2 p.m.

"I'm going to drive back to Cleveland with no worries," he said.