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D.C. lets some people with outstanding warrants do a 'Safe Surrender' at court



Willie Jones, left, talks with Kenyan McDuffie, city council member for Ward 5, about the Safe Surrender program and how it has changed his life. (Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post)

By [Keith L. Alexander](#) September 10 at 1:13 PM

Willie Jones, a former heroin user and dealer, said the program gave him the chance to try to make things right. In 2007, Jones was arrested for heroin distribution and was ordered to appear in court. But he didn't show up for his court date, and a judge issued a warrant for his arrest.

Later that year, D.C. Superior Court held its first Safe Surrender program, allowing people with outstanding warrants for nonviolent offenses to surrender in court and increase the chances that they would avoid jail time. Jones took advantage of it, he said, and ultimately resolved his case with a sentence of two years of probation.

"It was the first step in a new beginning," Jones said.

Jones on Wednesday joined officials from the court, D.C. police, the U.S. attorney's office and the attorney general's office as they gathered outside the courthouse to announce the city's third Safe Surrender initiative.



Willie Jones speaks to the media about how the Safe Surrender program has changed his life. (Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post)

Safe Surrender will run for three consecutive Saturdays beginning this weekend. The first initiative was held in 2007, when 479 people surrendered to authorities, officials said. In 2011, during the second program, 673 people turned themselves in.

Because prosecutors and judges show leniency to those who surrender, the court boasts that about 98 percent of those who come in with warrants are able to return home the same day and avoid jail altogether.

The program is not aimed at people with arrest warrants issued by police or people charged with violent offenses. Instead, it targets those with misdemeanor offenses, missed child-support payments and probation violations and those who have failed to pay court-imposed fines or appear in court. Some 12,000 people, court officials say, have outstanding warrants in the nation's capital.

Officials said people who have outstanding warrants may end up being arrested in front of co-workers or family, and the program allows them to avoid that possibility.

In an interview this week, Judge Lynn Leibovitz, the presiding judge of the court's criminal division, said that at one of the previous Safe Surrender sessions, an individual appeared before her who had a warrant from the 1980s.

"It creates a level of paranoia and limits the way they live their life," Leibovitz said. "But by turning themselves in, it gets a big albatross off their neck."

If someone with an outstanding warrant is pulled over in the District for a minor driving offense, that person runs the risk of being arrested if the officer discovers an outstanding warrant, Leibovitz said. Having outstanding warrants, for some, restricts how they conduct their everyday lives, including finding a job or housing, the judge said.

The event will be held in the lobby of the main courthouse at 500 Indiana Ave. NW, between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. Saturday as well as Sept. 17 and Sept. 24. Judges, court employees and prosecutors will be on hand to process those who show up. Attorneys from the District's Public Defender Service will offer free legal advice, and representatives from the District's Department of Behavioral Health and Unity Health Care will offer services for people with mental health problems or other health issues. Since 2007, Jones has emerged as the program's public face. He said he believed that if he had not turned himself in, he would have likely been sent to jail.

Jones, 56, now works as a claim clerk for the Department of Employment Services. He admits that he still has struggles: In 2014, he was arrested again for heroin distribution when he said he tried to earn "extra money" and began selling drugs so that he could purchase a headstone for his mother's cemetery plot. He was sentenced to 200 days in jail. But Jones says that life of quick money is behind him.

"You have to learn to trust in God and live off what you make. He'll take care of you," Jones said. "I'm not where I want to be, but I sure ain't where I used to be."