
Tax greed gets the best of 40 fugitives

Anne Arundel sheriff uses 'refunds' as bait

BY JUSTIN FENTON
(SUN REPORTER)

Perhaps they should have been tipped off by the fact that the comptroller's office isn't open on the weekends, or that you can't get a tax refund if you don't pay your taxes.

Either way, 40 people wanted on criminal warrants trekked to Annapolis on Saturday to claim a phony tax refund and left in handcuffs.

In what could be considered the Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes of police stings, the Anne Arundel County Sheriff's Office sent letters to 500 people this month, announcing that a computer glitch meant there was a \$572.26 check with their name on it that could be picked up in person.

Once they arrived and their identities were confirmed, deputies placed them under arrest.

People were still trickling in yesterday to score the refund.

"By having them come to us, we did in eight hours what it would take 40 hours to do," Sheriff Ron Bateman said. "No one got hurt, and no one resisted arrest. It was just some broken hearts."

The serving of a warrant is fraught with peril to officers, and the backlog of those who are wanted is daunting. In December, a state trooper with a task force that was seeking to arrest a sus-
[Please see STING, 6B]

Fugitives can't resist the lure of tax refunds

STING [From Page 1B]

pect in a Carroll County home invasion was shot. The suspect was killed when officers returned fire.

With a backlog of more than 10,000 unserved warrants in Anne Arundel — down from 12,000 when he took office in December — Bateman decided to have the targets come to him.

The subjects of 500 hundred of the most recent criminal warrants, from misdemeanors to felonies, were sent letters Oct. 5, notifying them that a computer error had been detected in the "tax break indicators" used to determine their tax rates.

The comptroller's office, they were told, had conducted an audit that found that they had overpaid their taxes by \$572.26, and they could pick up a refund

check at the Treasury Building in Annapolis Saturday.

Plainclothes deputies posing as receptionists had them escorted down the hall by plainclothes enforcement officers from the comptroller's office. They were arrested by uniformed deputies in a secluded area.

In the days leading up to the operation, some people called to ask for directions or confirm that the refund was legitimate, and they were referred to agents who read from a script of prepared answers. On Saturday, the visits were staggered, thanks in part to traffic caused by the Navy football game.

Overall, 40 people were arrested on 54 outstanding warrants. Many of them had been wanted for failure to appear in traffic court, but other charges included fraud, violation of pro-

bation, assault, drug possession and auto theft. They ranged from 19 to 52 years old; 23 were men and 17 were women.

The sheriff's office announced the arrests in a news release yesterday, accompanied by a list of "Famous Quotes" arranged like a David Letterman Top Ten List. They included:

"I knew this was a setup, but the rent was due."

"Do you validate parking?"

"You mean there's no check?"

"My mom said this was gonna happen."

And one person came for the refund despite not having worked or paid taxes in the past five years.

Joseph Shapiro, a spokesman for the comptroller's office, said the agency was "happy to help." And he said Marylanders shouldn't worry the next time

they get a letter from the state that it could be part of a sting operation.

"If they have a criminal warrant outstanding, then maybe they might think twice," Shapiro said. "I think the 99.999 percent of Marylanders who get letters from us are law-abiding citizens and won't even give it a second thought."

Bateman, meanwhile, acknowledged that publicizing the arrests might blow his agency's cover and put an end to this type of method of serving warrants.

"We'll wait a while, change our tactics and try something similar to this again," Bateman said. "I promised the citizens I would take care of reducing these warrants, and I've done what I said I would. I'm not done yet."

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