

'You mean there's no check?'

Sheriff lures wanted men, women with fake tax refund check

By **HEATHER RAWLYK**
Staff Writer

Smiles quickly turned to scowls and grimaces Saturday when 40 wanted men and women were served outstanding warrants when they went to collect a check they thought they'd be receiving for "overpaying their taxes."

The sting was part of county Sheriff Ron Bateman's plan to eliminate the more than 12,000 unserved warrants he inherited when he was elected in November — and the 10,000 more he's received since.

It's also something Sheriff Bateman said he's wanted to do since he was a major, but never had the staff to carry it out.

On Oct. 5, letters under the guise of the Comptroller of the Treasury Office were sent to 500 men and women wanted on criminal warrants ranging from misdemeanors to felony charges.

The letters said the Comptroller's Office had conducted an audit and that the recipient had overpaid their taxes. It said the recipient was owed a \$572.26 tax refund

from the State of Maryland, which could be picked up at the Treasury Building, at 80 Calvert St., between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. Saturday. The recipients were told they must provide two forms of identification — one of which had to be a photo ID — to get their refund, Sheriff's Department officials said.

Holding the sting in the Treasury Building "added legitimacy," Sheriff Bateman said. But just to be safe, he threw in some theatrics to make the situation even more believable.

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QUOTABLE

Many of the men and women served during the sting were left speechless. But several others had things to say. Favorite quotes of the day included:

- "I knew this was a setup, but the rent was due."
- "You mean there's no check?"
- "Why are you treating me like a criminal?"
- "Do you validate parking?"
- "My mom said this was gonna happen."
- "I knew I was getting locked up, like the Sheriffs."
- One deputy asked a man if he had worked or paid taxes in the past five years. The man answered that he hadn't. "And you showed up anyway?" the deputy asked.

STING

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Throughout the day, plain-clothes Sheriff's deputies waltzed out of the building holding faux checks and talking about what they would do with their refund, he said.

Sheriff Bateman even got in on the act, exiting with a grin and explaining to a wanted man that he was about to put a down payment on a new Harley.

"Everybody was walking in there with a smile," he said. "All smiles."

Inside the building, two plain-clothes Sheriff's deputies sat in as receptionists, taking ID's and having the wanted men and women fill out information cards. After they were done, the wanted were escorted to the end of a hallway, where

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— Sheriff Ron Bateman

they were greeted with a team of deputies and the truth about why they were there that day.

Sheriff's deputies arrested 59 people and cleared 53 warrants.

An additional person showed up yesterday afternoon to pick up his check — even though the letter said they could only be picked up Saturday. He, like the others, didn't leave the building with anything more than a frown.

Sheriff Bateman said the sting was a "huge success" and went off without a hitch. He said it was the smoothest operation he has been part of in 27 years.

"Everybody was calm and nobody resisted arrest," he said. "We made 40 arrests in 8 hours. It normally takes 40 hours to do (that)."

Holding the sting at the Treasury Building also was safer for deputies.

"It was a safer environment — on our turf in a controlled environment," Sheriff Bateman said.

In the past 11 months, the Sheriff's Department has carried out three major warrant sweeps throughout the county in addition to Saturday's sting. The department also has conducted an in-depth audit of

old warrants, helping to bring outstanding warrants down to about 10,000 current outstanding warrants.

Comptroller Peter Franchot applauded the Sheriff's Department and Comptroller's Office field enforcement officials.

"Our office is proud to continue partnering with our friends in local law enforcement in various and innovative ways to keep our communities safe and protect law-abiding individuals and businesses," he said in a written statement.

Sheriff Bateman said he "isn't done yet."

"If you are out there and you have received one of our letters, it's time to turn yourself into the Sheriff's Office," he wrote in a statement. "This can be accomplished by calling 410-222-1490."

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