

Program ties tax refunds, warrants

BY ANDREA F. SIEGEL
The Baltimore Sun

Law enforcement officials are watching a test program in Anne Arundel County that entices people with open criminal warrants to turn themselves in — so they can get their state tax refunds.

Thus far, the results of dangling a refund as bait have stunned the sheriff who pitched the one-year pilot project.

“If I had gotten 10, that would be good, too. But 134? That’s huge,” said Sheriff Ron Bateman. “It’s baseball season, and this is a grand slam.”

Under the measure adopted last year, and which went into practical effect with the current tax season, the comptroller’s office blocks Maryland tax refunds of residents of Anne Arundel County, and others, who have unserved warrants in Anne Arundel.

The refund check is released once the warrant is cleared up. The cost to both the comptroller and the sheriff is negligible, they said, and it is considered safer and less costly for people to turn themselves in than for deputies to spend days tracking them down.

The program is unique in the state, and Bateman said he is not aware of a similar program anywhere in the country.

The Comptroller’s Office began mailing letters as tax season got under way. It notified 283 people who filed income tax returns that it would hold their refund while they deal with their open warrant. Those people account for a little more than \$243,000 in waiting refund checks, officials said.

As of last week, 101 people had turned themselves in, and another 33 arranged to have warrants recalled or otherwise cleared them up, Bateman said. What the warrants were for was not available, but during the initial week, a sample showed warrants for probation violation hearings and failure to appear in court for both misdemeanors and felonies, which make up more than three-fourths of the county’s open warrants. The peoples’ names were not released.

How many warrants will be cleared this year is unknown, Bateman said, but based on the initial response, “I just feel that majority of them will be satisfied. I think that people’s greed — they want their money — is going to drive this.”

Meanwhile, a bill in the General Assembly to extend the pilot for five more years to see how the program unfolds is supported by the Maryland Sheriffs’ Association and Maryland Chiefs of Police Association.

“When the Maryland chiefs and sheriffs joint legislative committee looked at it, not only did we support it, but the sheriffs and the chiefs said if this is working, we should consider expanding it statewide,” said David C. Morris, chief of the Riverdale Park Police Department and legislative co-chair for the police chiefs organization.

The bill has passed the Senate and had a hearing in the House Ways and Means Committee on Friday.

Anne Arundel County has about 8,000 open warrants, some decades old, and other jurisdictions have thousands more.

“We are interested in seeing the results, and what the recommendation is for the rest of the state,” said Col. Phil Kasten of the Carroll County Sheriff’s Office.

Comptroller Peter Franchot, a Democrat, backs the five-year extension, as he did the one-year pilot.

Bateman approached him two years ago with what he thought was a creative way to attack the warrant problem, Franchot said. The bill fizzled the first year it was introduced, and was tweaked and signed into law last year.

The pilot is limited to people who file individual returns, are not in the military, are not juveniles and don’t owe child support, as the comptroller’s office already intercepts refund checks where child support is past-due. Many older, unserved warrants can’t be used because they lack key information that is more likely to be captured nowadays, including a Social Security number and birth date, to match the wanted people with the refunds.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland hasn’t taken a position on the bill, according to a spokeswoman.

Del. Talmadge Branch, a Baltimore Democrat, majority whip and a member of the Ways and Means Committee, said the warrant program, like other pilot programs, should be well scrutinized before going into every jurisdiction.

“If it’s proven to do well, someone might grab it and say let’s make it statewide. But you want to look at the results of what the pilot program has done,” he said.

But Franchot said he doesn’t see a down side.

“If other counties want to join in I see no other reason not to build on it,” he said. “We would be talking, around the state, of thousands of letters. So many dollars would be saved by not having to track all these people down.”

andrea.siegel@baltsun.com
twitter.com/andsiegel