

# Tax refund program brings in scofflaws

Withholding funds from people with open warrants helps clear county backlog

BY ANDREA F. SIEGEL  
The Baltimore Sun

When Anne Arundel County Sheriff Ron Bateman first suggested withholding state tax refunds from people who have open warrants nearly three years ago, critics said it was a foolish pursuit.

"One of the criticisms I got was, 'How many criminals have jobs where they are going to get a tax refund?'" he recalled.

He couldn't say. Now he can.

"There were 396," he told the County Council during a recent budget hearing.



Ron Bateman

This past tax season — the first with the program fully in effect — that's the number of letters the state comptroller's office sent, telling people if they wanted their money, they'd have to clear their open Anne Arundel County warrants. The program also applied to county residents who may have open warrants elsewhere. That figure is through May 8, a little more than three weeks after the April 15 tax filing deadline.

"We've cleared 215 warrants," Bateman said.

Bateman said he had been seeking an efficient and safe way to trim the number of open warrants, which hovers around 8,000. Refund checks proved to be a strong motivator.

The program, which he said appears to be unique nationally, was enacted into law last year as a pilot project for Anne Arundel County. This year, while tax season was underway, the General Assembly passed a measure extending the one-year pilot for another five years.

The criminal warrants cleared — mostly by people turning themselves in, but also by having some canceled or otherwise resolved — represent cases involving 32 felonies and 234 misdemeanors.

Warrants were mostly for failures to appear in court for traffic and criminal cases, but there were exceptions — including cases involving allegations that people failed to register as sex offenders, and unanswered violations of probation. There was also an open prostitution warrant — posing the question of whether the person included income from that line of work on a tax return.

Regardless of the nature of the case, Bateman said, having people turn themselves in is easier and less costly than hunting people down.

"It is safer to have people turn themselves in than for our deputies to go knocking on doors, not knowing who is on the other side of that door and whether they See **WARRANTS**, page 5

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have a gun," Bateman said.

The numbers are still inching up, even though tax season has passed. As of last week, 236 warrants had been cleared.

The office has issued about \$210,000 in refunds through the program. If everyone who'd been sent a letter turned themselves in, that figure would have been about \$110,000 more.

The comptroller's office supported the program, and the state Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services created the related computer software, with the Governor's Office of Crime Control & Prevention coordinating the initial effort.

The program has piqued interest elsewhere in the state and beyond, according to the county sheriff's and comptroller's offices. Bateman said among them have been Baltimore City and Howard County, and a jurisdiction in Nebraska.

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