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According to D.C. Superior Court records, Karen Evans broke the law. She was charged with failure to appear in court, in violation of probation. A bench warrant for her arrest had been issued.

Yet Evans had served out her probation in the state of Ohio. She did not know that she had a warrant hanging over her head until she received a letter from Safe Surrender, a D.C. Superior Court program.

With help from the program, a long August day at the Moultrie Courthouse enabled her to clear her record. She left the courthouse free of all charges and feeling relieved and grateful.

"It's like freedom," Evans said. "It's like something you didn't know you had just haunting you. I've closed the book on this and opened up something new. I can move on with the future."

Evans is just one of about 15,000 D.C. residents with outstanding bench warrants, commonly issued when someone fails to appear for a court date, said D.C. Superior Court Spokesman Tom Feeney. Most of these people have committed relatively minor offenses.

But their cases appear as blots on their records, making it hard to find work, get driver's licenses and move on with their lives. The cases take up valuable court time needed for dealing with more serious crimes.

Safe Surrender enables those who are wanted for nonviolent felonies or misdemeanors to avoid public arrest by voluntarily surrendering to the court. In return, many charges are dropped and defendants can return home without anything holding them back.

"A lot of what we have is uncertainty and a misunderstanding of the criminal justice system," Feeney said. "We're trying to communicate with the public and prevent unfortunate situations."

"It's a program designed to keep everybody safe," said D.C. Superior Court Chief Judge Lee Satterfield.

Safe Surrender has posted a list of defendants with outstanding bench warrants on the D.C. Superior Court website and sent letters to everyone on the list,

alerting them about their violations. Many of those who attended an Aug. 20 event said that these letters were the reason that they participated.

“Being a D.C. resident all my life made me want to do it this way instead of the police pulling me over and making a scene in public,” said Darren Williams, whose traffic violation and missed court date had prompted the Safe Surrender letter. “I could have saved a lot of tax dollars if they had done this sooner.”

That recent event was not Safe Surrender’s first in D.C. The program began in 2007, drawing 580 participants. This year, it spanned three consecutive Saturdays beginning Aug. 6 and attracted 764 participants, eclipsing that of the 2007 campaign. This high number is likely due to the extensive advertising devoted to the event, which included formats such as bus and Metro ads, fliers and grassroots outreach as well as Facebook and Twitter.

“In terms of PR today, you really need all forms,” Feeney said.

Though the high turnout is a sign of the D.C. community’s proactive thinking, it also seemed to cause some problems at the event. Reginald Dockett, who said he had been charged with a misdemeanor, said he waited for several hours for his case to come up.

Charles Dykes, who was there on a heroin charge, was starting to get impatient. “I gotta get out of here,” Dykes said. “I’m getting hungry.” With a limited number of courtrooms and a lengthy processing system before participants got to see the judges, frustration was inevitable.

Rainey Brandt, Judge Satterfield’s special counsel, said that some warrants dated as far back as 1978. The older the case, the more effort was needed to process it, sometimes causing names to be called out of order.

Several people said that the Aug. 13 event had been slower, and the process was much smoother the second time around. “We had some logistical nooks and crannies that weren’t working,” Satterfield said. “Now it seems to be much smoother.”

The courthouse’s design also proved to be challenging. Service providers such as Unity Healthcare and the Addiction Prevention and Recovery Administration set up tables in one wing of the building while the courtrooms, to which defendants were restricted once they had surrendered, were located in the opposite wing.

“The layout was a bit odd,” said Todd Menhinick, a Quality Assessment Specialist for APRA. “We started distributing information in the courtrooms once they filled up. It was difficult to chat since it was a high stigma issue, and we didn’t want to make them talk about anything private, but hopefully if we can impact some lives, it’s time well spent.”

For most participants, it was indeed time well spent. Deron, who arrived with his four children in tow, had a drug possession charge dismissed in a matter of minutes. “I recommend that everyone come down here and get it behind them,” he said. “To turn themselves in, to get it swiped off, it was the best thing that ever happened to me.”