

# 2nd try for tax refund leverage

Bill would withhold  
money from subjects of  
arrest warrants in Arundel

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A bill to withhold the tax refund from anyone wanted on an open criminal warrant in Anne Arundel County will return to the General Assembly for a second attempt at passage.

The measure would create a one-year local trial, but proponents say it has the potential to lead to a statewide program. It would force people with unserved warrants in the county to choose between turning themselves in or forgoing tax refund dollars.

The county sheriff hopes people will be hungry for the money.

"This gives people an incentive," said Sheriff Ronald S. Bateman.

Exactly how many people might be affected is unclear, though Bateman noted that the potential for a significant impact on open warrants exists.

Nearly 200,000 county residents received state tax refunds in 2009, Bateman said. Of his random check of 50 people arrested locally last year, 40 percent were due refunds.

The measure would apply only to those wanted on criminal warrants. Those include probation violations, failure-to-appear charges and jailable driving charges such as drunken driving and hit-and-run.

More than three-fourths of the outstanding warrants involve minor charges, Bateman said. But no matter what the charges, deputies still have to find the people and serve the warrants. "It's money and manpower," he said.

Instead of the refund that's due, people with outstanding warrants would receive a letter explaining why the money was withheld. Clearing up the warrant would lead to the release of the refund. Most people facing charges, especially minor ones, are released by District Court commissioners, often without having bail set. But there's a risk of being detained, particularly with more serious charges and an inability to make bail.

With a backlog of 8,100 unserved warrants and 1,000 new ones arriving every month, Bateman had approached lawmakers a year ago.

This will be the second effort at getting the bill enacted, and a bill filed in advance of next year's session includes the changes made near the end of the legislative session last spring to address legislators' initial concerns. Those changes would exempt active members of the military and anyone who files a joint return.

"You want to get the person," said state Sen. John Astle, an Annapolis Democrat sponsoring the bill for the second time. "At the same time, you don't want to hurt the family."

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