

OPINION

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Open warrants and tax refunds

Last year, Anne Arundel County instituted a novel approach to handling outstanding warrants. Due to the success of the program, separate bills currently under consideration in Annapolis would authorize the same program in Baltimore and in Washington County. A third would make the innovation available statewide.

Nothing succeeds like success, and that's what Anne Arundel County has experienced with this program, which links state tax refunds to outstanding warrants. Serving warrants is an ongoing chore for law enforcement — involving time, expense and the potential for trouble. This new approach reduces all those negatives substantially.

According to a recent *Baltimore Sun* story, the Governor's Office of Crime Control and Prevention maintains a listing of all outstanding warrants. It sent those from Anne Arundel County to the state Comptroller's Office, which checked them against its rolls of individuals due to receive tax refunds.

Any matches were forwarded to Anne Arundel Sheriff Ron Bateman, who then posted letters to the scofflaws informing them that they would not receive their tax refunds until their warrants were cleared.

Would this really work? Yes, according to Bateman. His office sent letters to hundreds of people with outstanding warrants. If they wanted to receive their tax refunds, the letters said, they'd have to resolve their legal issues first. By the numbers: Of the 446 people who received a letter, 345 of them turned themselves in — an impressive 77 percent success rate.

And while most of the warrants involved less serious infractions such as failure to appear in court or probation violations, 27 of them were felony warrants.

As *The Sun* reported, Bateman "likes the refund program because it gets people to come to authorities, instead of having to send out deputies to find suspects. The process is safer and quicker, he said."

The success of this pilot program has not gone unnoticed by other jurisdictions, including Baltimore. Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake would like to try it in Charm City. So would Washington County Sheriff Douglas Mullendore, who says, "Everybody is all about money. If they think they're going to lose a couple hundred dollars, they might as well turn themselves in."

Open warrants are a huge problem statewide. The Baltimore Sheriff's Office currently has more than 25,000 in-house. In Anne Arundel County, Bateman has been able to reduce the 13,000-plus warrants he inherited when he was elected in 2006 to about 8,700. Still, new ones come in at the rate of 800 to 1,000 per month.

We like this creative program. It's a fair, safe and apparently very effective way of inducing outstanding warrant holders to turn themselves in and clear up their legal issues with the state.

The statewide warrant/tax-refund bill has already passed muster in the Maryland Senate. We encourage the House to also vote to make it law.