

Turn yourself in

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent
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Municipal Court will dismiss bench warrants during Self-Surrender Week

It probably started with that sinking feeling that comes with the glow of red and blue lights flashing in the rearview mirror, maybe with the momentary whoop-whoop of a siren to get attention.

The next step might have been a traffic ticket or even a night in the drunk tank. Either way, it's a pretty sure bet there will be fines. Even if traffic school can help avoid demerits on the driving record, that fine will probably still have to be paid.

That's no fun for anyone, especially someone who's already living paycheck to paycheck, or may not even get a regular paycheck. At that point, the ticket may look like a looming disaster.

Simply not showing up for a court appearance is not an option, at least not one likely to improve the situation. Usually a judge will issue a citation for failure to appear – otherwise known as a bench warrant – which carries another \$100 fine as well as putting the defendant's name into the system where it could trigger an automatic arrest if the subject has another run-in with the law.

But there is a way out, and Gallup Municipal Court plans to highlight that with Self-Surrender week June 12-16. All that week, anyone with a pending bench warrant can show up to court between 7 am and 4 pm, no appointment necessary, and give their name. Judge Janell Griego will dismiss the bench warrant and get the subject's case back on track.

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“Doing this just opens that door and takes the fear out of coming to court for those who have a bench warrant,” Court Administrator Erin Gutierrez said. “Everybody is fearful of having to come to court, whether it’s a traffic case or a DWI.”

Although the court and police department share the 451 Boardman Dr. address, no police officers will be standing by to throw a net over defendants, Gutierrez said. This is an effort to make it easier for defendants to clean up their records.

“That’s where people get confused. They think, ‘They’re right by the police department, a cop could be waiting for me,’” Gutierrez said. “We’re not trying to put people in jail for their bench warrants, we just want them to take care of them.”

For pre-adjudication defendants – those who never showed up for the underlying case to be heard – the bench warrant will be lifted and a new date will be scheduled.

For those whose cases have already been decided, the court can help set up a payment or compliance schedule to get the person back on the straight and narrow; in some cases it’s as simple as setting a schedule for visits with the court and, of course, paying the \$100 bench warrant fee.

The court first tried the Self Surrender Week strategy in October 2021, after Griego learned of another court’s experience at a conference.

Gutierrez thinks the COVID-19 pandemic and not knowing Griego’s reputation discouraged a lot of people from taking advantage of it.

“We didn’t get very many the first time,” Gutierrez said. “We hope this time we get a little more now that people know how she runs her court.”

Gutierrez said the court hopes to do the event annually. Defendants can go see Griego for the

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same treatment throughout the year, but only between 9 am and 2 pm on weekdays. Self-Surrender Week is aimed at raising awareness and making it easier for defendants by extending the hours they can seek relief.

For further information, call Gutierrez at (505) 863-4469.

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