

Amnesty Day allows people to stay out of Duval jail

One-day court helps citizens while saving about \$20,000.

Posted: July 30, 2011 - 3:17pm | **Updated:** July 31, 2011 - 9:37am

By [Tracy Jones](#)

Each person filed into the auditorium, eagerly awaiting a turn for a clean slate.

Each had a crime that needed to be resolved, and this was a chance to make it right, without the usual consequences.

The Fourth Judicial Court hosted Amnesty Day on Saturday at the downtown library's auditorium. The first-time event was aimed at those who had committed a non-violent misdemeanor and had an outstanding arrest warrant.

The people who took advantage of Amnesty Day had the chance to plead their cases and clear their warrants without any jail time.

See [our photo gallery from Amnesty Day](#)

"It may not look like it, but you are in court. Move closer, there will be no arresting today," said Circuit Judge Hugh Carithers to the dozens of people sitting in the auditorium. Carithers, along with Circuit Judge Jean Johnson, heard cases throughout the morning, spending about three minutes per person.

Carithers and Johnson were among the many volunteers, including court reporters, prosecutors and public defenders, who worked the event pro bono.

Alexandra Wise came to Amnesty Day to clear her warrant on a possession of a controlled substance charge.

Wise said she had already served 90 days in jail and wanted to get rid of her warrant. Johnson dismissed the case, and Wise walked away with the charge resolved and a fresh start, she said.

"I came down to handle it because I already did the time," Wise said. "I'm just glad it's over with."

The goal was to clear stagnant cases that were clogging up the court dockets, said Public Defender Matt Shirk. He said each of the cases could take a couple of days for Jacksonville Sheriff's Office to resolve, and this event would save the city at least \$20,000 in costs.

"This is a volunteer effort designed to clear up numerous minor cases that otherwise could drain public funds if they had gone through the court system and the conventional process," Shirk said.

About 400 people were sent letters before the event, notifying them that their cases qualified to be heard on Amnesty Day. The most common charges were petty theft and open container violations, said Cynthia Hunold, director of county court in the Public Defender's Office.

Once people were seen, the only consequence they faced was having to pay the minimum court cost of about \$300. If they hadn't attended the event, they faced a maximum of a year in jail for their crimes.

And the outcome of a jail-free sentence had many smiling as they exited the makeshift courtroom.

"This is happy court. I wish all courts could be like this," Hunold said.

Many showed up to clear their cases, although they were not one of the 400 notified. Those people were still able to stand in front of the judge and obtain a future court date, which will erase their warrants as long as they show up in court. Janice Neeley was one of those not on the list. She came about a 2009 trespassing charge and received a court date for Aug. 16.

"It's a good project, and it was orchestrated very well," Neeley said. "Everything was smooth sailing."

At the beginning of Amnesty Day, however, there were skeptics.

Hunold said she had to assure many people this was, in fact, a free-and-clear situation.

"Some people were afraid this was a roundup," she said.

Major Williams came to Amnesty Day to clear a charge he received more than a year ago for drinking a can of beer in public. He said he's not the type of person to go to jail, so this was the perfect way for him to resolve his case.

Williams said he hadn't had a charge on his record in more than 30 years. With this case over, Williams said he was going to go home and celebrate.

"I feel like I can go home, sit and drink a can of beer," he said.

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