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Md. agents go after suspected probation violators New law means they don't have to 'fight with one arm tied behind their back'

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Six hours after a law authorizing select parole and probation agents to serve warrants on suspected probation violators went into effect, they were knocking on doors in Baltimore.

Thursday morning a special unit of agents served four probation violation warrants, including two on people they deemed likely to be involved in handgun violence. Statewide, there are 40 parole and probation agents who have police powers and can serve warrants. Half of them are in the Baltimore area.

Until Thursday, those agents were allowed to serve only parole violation warrants - a tiny slice of the thousands of outstanding warrants for people who violated the terms of their release from prison by failing to show up in court or to comply with drug testing or agent check-ins, for example. More than 85 percent of the 70,000 people under state supervision are on court-ordered probation.

"It was like they had to fight with one arm tied behind their back," said Kristen Mahoney, director of the Governor's Office of Crime Control and Prevention, which advocated the change in law.

Patrick McGee, director of parole and probation, said the authority to serve probationers "cuts a lot of the red tape." He and Mahoney described scenarios when agents had no choice but to call 911 or let a probationer go free because of their inability to serve warrants - even if that person had walked into a probation office. Other times, parole and probation agents out serving warrants with sheriff's deputies would have to wait in the car when they came upon a person with a probation violation warrant.

"This helps us get the person off the street quicker," McGee said, "before the trail gets cold."

He said the warrant unit will be out "every day" for the foreseeable future, concentrating primarily on suspected violators who have been identified by the Violence Prevention Initiative, a law enforcement task force, as likely to be involved in handgun crimes.

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