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## Bondsmen may go the way of the dodo

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Posted: Sunday, June 5, 2011 12:00 am |

David Sheffold was busted for allegedly cooking meth in a garage on the city's south side. His bond was set at \$10,000. It was an old-fashioned bond, a so-called secure bond. In other words, somebody had to guarantee the whole thing before Sheffold could get out of jail. The somebody in this case was Rick Adams of Adams Bail Bonds.

For this service, Adams charged the standard fee — 10 percent of the bond. In this case, that was \$1,000.

Unfortunately for Adams, Sheffold did not show up for court.

So on Thursday, Adams trudged into Division 26 of the 22nd Circuit Court in downtown St. Louis and handed over a check for \$10,000. Circuit Judge Jack Garvey said the court would hold the check for 30 days.

If Adams can produce Sheffold in that time, he'll get his check back. If not, he's out of luck.

Actually, Adams may be out of luck in any event. Bondsmen are an endangered species.

Late last month, Garvey issued a directive to Yvonne Edwards, the pretrial release commissioner. Her office recommends to the judges the amount and types of bonds for various defendants. First, Garvey instructed Edwards that all charges of unlawful use of a weapon are to be set at \$30,000 cash only, regardless of the defendant's prior record.

The idea, of course, is to stem gun violence, but cash only? What are bondsmen supposed to do?

But also, there was this — absolutely no secure bonds are to be recommended.

That could put bondsmen out of business. I stopped by the courthouse to see Garvey last week.

"I don't like bondsmen," he said.

He has his reasons. Last year, Mary Moran, then the pretrial release commissioner, resigned after a newspaper story reported that bonds for defendants were being changed without explanation by Moran's office, and these modified bonds were all serviced by one company, Bob Block Bail Bonds. In one of the cases, Garvey's name had been put on a court order authorizing the change. He said he didn't sign the order. Moran said she must have mistakenly put his name on it.

Who knows? Like characters from a Damon Runyon novel, bondsmen seem to exist on the edge of respectability. They're always being accused of this or that. Either they're allegedly paying off somebody at

the jail to get clients, or they're slipping a few bucks to somebody at the fugitive squad to get their skippers put at the top of the pile.

Plus, of course, we're talking about the courthouse. Animosity reigns. The cops don't like the prosecutors because they think the prosecutors turn down any case that's not a sure thing. The prosecutors don't like the cops because they think the cops make arrests on sketchy evidence just to make an arrest. The bondsmen don't like the judges because the judges don't order enough secure bonds. The judges think the bondsmen prey on people. All this animosity, and we haven't even talked about the defendants.

Actually, there are points on both sides of the bondsmen debate.

Garvey points out that the 21st Circuit Court in St. Louis County has nearly done away with secure bonds. I spoke with Paul Fox, the court's director. He said the judges generally order a 10 percent cash bond. In other words, if a bond is set at \$10,000, a person can get out with \$1,000. Instead of going into a bondsman's pocket, the money goes into the court's registry, and if the defendant hires a lawyer, the lawyer can get that money.

This helps out an overwhelmed public defender system, said Fox.

But if the bond is unsecured, what is to keep a defendant from skipping?

"We have no-shows, but not so many," said Fox. "When you talk about bonds, you're mostly talking about minor offenses. You are generally not talking about people facing long sentences. Once an attorney is in the case, most defendants show up."

Well, yes, but what about those who don't? Sheffold had an attorney. He still went to the wind.

If a skipper is really a bad character, the cops will look for him. Maybe the U.S. Marshals — the professional man-hunters — will get involved. But what about an accused meth cook? What about Sheffold?

Adams has skin in that game.

Plus, bondsmen will work with people.

"I take credit cards. I work out payment plans," Mark Hucker of Action Fast Bail Bonds told me. "Without us, the jails get overcrowded."

Plus, of course, these are small businesses, the engine of the American economy. They pay taxes and buy ads and sponsor softball teams.

For how much longer?