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Jails Return Confiscated Cash in Debit Cards, Minus Hefty Fees

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Some protesters who were jailed following late night demonstrations Saturday evening were surprised to find that the county returned their confiscated cash back to them, minus some hefty fees, in the form of a prepaid debit card.

The county policy of transferring inmate cash to debit cards at the inmate's own expense sparked a torrent of comments on Portland's Reddit page Monday, racking up over 200 comments in 8 hours.

The program is managed by Numia Financial, a for-profit company. County officials said it saves their staff time while saving the taxpayer money, but critics argued that the practice is especially unfair to indigent suspects.

"We can't trust them with our cash, but we can trust them with our lives; sweet," [one Portland Redditor wrote](#).

"No one should be forced to make a purchase to get their money back."

The cards have a monthly fee of \$5.95 and an ATM fee of \$2.95.

Every inmate booked into Multnomah County Jail, no matter how long, is issued an account in their name. The money in the inmate's account is typically what they had on them at the time of their arrest.

If someone is released late at night with \$20 on their card and they need cash to get home, one of their few options are an ATM withdrawal. After the fee is paid, the account would hold \$17.05 — too little to meet the minimum withdrawal requirement of \$20 held by most ATMs, leaving the releasee without many options to get home.

"It will take lawsuits to undo this kind of behavior by government institutions because right now its in their best interest," [another Redditor stated](#).

Officials said the cards cut down on the amount of cash-handling jail staff have to do.

Lieutenant Steve Alexander from the Multnomah County Sheriff's office said a [December 2011 audit](#) was one of the main reasons the county adopted the system.

"Handling cash takes time," [the audit stated](#). "The Sheriff's Office estimates that the Fiscal Unit spends approximately 2-3 hours per day handling inmate cash at a cost of \$23,000 per year."

The county handles a lot of cash. In 2011, it dealt with \$3.7 million in jail and inmate related transactions. It's unknown how much of that figure can be attributed to tallies of cash possessed by inmates during the booking process.

Multnomah County saves in operational costs from issuing prepaid cards but doesn't receive any direct

financial benefit.

"We don't make any money off of it," Alexander said. "This provided a better way to do security controls and cash accounting. It just worked."

"This is kind of the way a lot of the jails are going because there's more cost controls," Alexander added.

Columbia County uses the same procedure, and the same company, to return money to its inmates.

"We don't have to count, double count and worry about errors of accounting," Columbia County Sheriff Captain Dustin Hald said. "It's a reduction in time and an elimination of accounting errors."

When jail staff were tasked with handling the money of inmates from when they were booked, Hald said simple human errors came up — like two \$100 bills sticking together, for example.



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A number of other counties across the nation have adopted similar procedural systems; a number of them have since encountered lawsuits.

Hald said he believes the practice is here to stay, adding that there are no fees associated with using the card, aside from the \$6 monthly service fee which is assessed five days after the card is issued.

"No one has shown that this is a violation of rights," Hald said. "The only fees that could happen is in the first five days is if they want to load more money. They have five days to access their money free of charge."

Another blogger likened being arrested with cash to being arrested with any other type of personal possession.

"If you were arrested wearing a fedora," the blogger wrote, "they don't give you a beanie upon release with instructions on how you can redeem it for your fedora minus a small portion of the brim."



A representative from Numi Financial declined to comment. He did say, however, that the practice of obtaining government contracts to provide arrestees with the money they possessed when they were booked into jail was commonplace for the company.

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