What is a ‘subsistence fee’? These are fees charged which help offset the costs of jail operation and to house, feed and clothe inmates. A daily subsistence fee is charged into each inmate’s account and may accrue for three years. At the end of the three years, the debt may be cleared and the process starts over again.

The money in each inmate’s account is a combination of money that was collected from the inmate during booking and money earned through work release.

In accordance with F.S.S. 951.033, jails are allowed to place a civil lien on any prisoner who has accumulated a greater amount of subsistence fees than the amount in their individual inmate accounts or commissary accounts. This results in a negative balance. To date, the majority of Florida jails have not placed civil liens on any inmates however reserve this right.

Those inmates who return to jail within three years and have a negative balance in their account will still owe the balance as well as continue to accrue fees. With little exception, all counties cumulate these debts. Any money put into this account will first be applied to their outstanding balance. When returning to jail with debt, some jail administrators opt to apply a percentage of the money found on the inmate at booking and apply it to their amount owed while leaving them with a percentage for personal use. Any money left over may be used for purchases within the commissary.

How are these accounts and fees tracked throughout the inmate’s stay? Software from each jail is used to track the inmate’s accounts. Software may either track fees and deposits or drop fees older than three years automatically every day. This software is either contracted out to a private vendor or maintained in-house.

Why are subsistence fees necessary for county jails and the community? Every dollar collected by the jails from inmates is one dollar more for other important endeavors. Tax payers will be happy to know that instead of simply housing, feeding and clothing inmates correctional officers may now collect money to offset these costs.

How much are these fees? Fees applied to accounts do not usually exceed five dollars a day. Additional fees may also accrue which include medical fees. Some jails do not collect subsistence fees due to their clientele or they may only collect certain fees such as booking and medical fees.

Who collects these fees? F.S.S. 951.033 awards the authority to the chief correctional officer for the county to seek payment of fees. Most counties’ chief correctional officer is or is appointed by the sheriff.

Subsistence fees are not meant to be detrimental or excessively punitive to inmates. These are simply fees associated with certain costs of incarceration. Subsistence fees generally do not exceed five dollars a day and it is likely that outside of jail these individuals would spend at least that amount per day on necessities. These fees are also only collected when the inmates have sufficient funds.

A special thanks to all the Sheriffs Offices who participated in this survey: Baker, Brevard, Collier, Columbia, Desoto, Duval, Flagler, Franklin, Indian River, Marion, Miami-Dade, Monroe, Okeechobee, Palm Beach, Polk Seminole, St. Johns Counties