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The program, the first of its kind in Oregon, connects inmates with resources upon their release and also offers services to low-criminality citizens who have contact with law enforcement in an effort to keep them from going to jail in the first place.

"We have a population at our jail where many people are struggling with mental illness," Clackamas County Sheriff Craig Roberts told the county's quarterly newsletter. "If you just boot them out the door, they can often end up right back in jail. The goal of the Transition Center is to break that pattern and change people's lives."

Repeat offenders account for more than half of those receiving a charge known as interfering with public transit, or IPT.

It's a class A misdemeanor punishable by up to one year in jail, and during the one-year period between mid 2014 and 2015, TriMet's prosecutor filed charges for more than 400 of them.

This controversial charge is often issued to fare-jumpers who have been excluded from TriMet property and have returned before the exclusionary period has ended.

When Street Roots first reported on this vague and over-used criminal charge ("One wrong step," Street Roots, March 10, 2015), Fox said 99 percent of her clients in Community Court charged with IPT are accused of entering TriMet property while under an "exclusion." She said in many cases, the rider has no idea they were excluded from TriMet property at the time of arrest, so it comes as a surprise when they find themselves facing significant criminal charges.

She said since then, nothing has changed, and IPTs continue to make up a quarter of her caseload.

Street Roots estimate prosecuting IPT charges cost courts in the Portland metro area approximately \$1.4 million in 2014. This does not include costs associated with arresting offenders, transporting them and lodging them in county jails. This estimate was derived from the average cost of prosecuting a misdemeanor in Oregon, determined to be \$1,679 by a University of Oregon report created for the Criminal

Justice Commission in 2010. More recent financial information regarding the cost of prosecuting low-level crimes in Oregon or in the county is not available.

When a bill was introduced in 2015 to change the language of this charge so that it couldn't be used in the place of crimes that carry a lesser penalty such as trespassing, disorderly conduct or theft of services, TriMet's prosecutor and TriMet's lobbyist met with legislators and convinced them it's a tool transit police need to maintain order.

But what order it's maintaining is questionable. An examination of all IPTs charged by the neighborhood DDA in the course of one year revealed more than half were issued to repeat offenders who had within that same period, been issued at least two IPTs.

While TriMet, PBA and Lloyd district business interests help fund prosecutors, they do not contribute funding to the jail where offenders are booked, to the nonprofit tasked with offering those charged a public defense, or to the courts, where the cases are processed.

On March 4, Borg sat before City Club members with Multnomah County District Attorney Rod Underhill and other law enforcement representatives. They had been invited to the forum in downtown Portland's Sentinel Hotel to discuss the findings of the Racial and Ethnic Disparities Report by the MacArthur Foundation that had revealed widespread disparities in the county's criminal justice system, with blacks being six times more likely than whites to be in jail.

Burg told the room the disparities outlined in the report reflect thousand of decisions made by the police and prosecutors, and it's the details behind those arrests that need to be better understood.

"It's the chippy charges – it's the small cases," Borg said. "We are putting kids on the path of the criminal justice system with trespasses, with resisting arrest, with interfering with public transportation."

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Slug

by Aileen McPherson

Swirling, dancing, hanging by a glistening string.
What are you doing? Mating.
Two become one, then hide from the Sun.
Beneath the trees, under the leaves, silver trails pave the way.
Soft bellies slide with ease in the garden of my dreams.
Safe to live and sleep, safe to play and eat.
Welcome friends come on in
There's room for all
in my garden
Behind the wall.

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