



Prepaid Card Recommendations Memo

Version 1

November 2023

The California Integrated Travel Project (Cal-ITP) is committed to improving payments for mobility as a means of making transit more attractive and efficient while fostering financial inclusion. Included in this umbrella of subtopics is the distribution of public subsidies using prepaid cards. This document summarizes Cal-ITP's learnings to date, and provides draft guidance to public agencies on use cases, best practices, and recommendations for procuring and rolling out prepaid cards for subsidy distribution.

Background

Despite some progress over recent years, millions of Americans remain un- and under banked, largely excluded from traditional banking services. In 2021, the FDIC reported that 4.5% of Americans are unbanked, having no person in the household with a bank account, and another 14.1% are underbanked with access to at least one bank account in the household but not to adequate financial services¹. The survey highlighted that households are more likely to be unbanked as income decreases – for example, 19.8% of those who make less than \$15,000 were unbanked while only 0.6% of those making over \$75,000 fared the same.² Further, research from the Sacramento-Davis-Woodland area of California showed that un- and under-banked people are over-represented as public transit users with 31% of riders surveyed being unbanked and 22% underbanked (with only a checking or savings account).³

¹ The unbanked population is overrepresented on transit, for example, a [survey from 2021](#) shows 31% of passengers were unbanked in the Davis-Sacramento-Woodland area of California.

² [2021 FDIC National Survey of Unbanked and Underbanked Households](#).

³ Un- and Underbanked Transit Passengers and the California Integrated Travel Project, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8hb738wd>

Governments at all levels can play a role in addressing this gap. With new survey questions for 2021, the FDIC highlighted how the COVID-19 pandemic proved the important role that government agencies can play in this. Significantly, 44.8% of recently banked households who also received a government benefit – pandemic stimulus, unemployment benefits, or similar – attribute such payments as a reason why they opened a bank account since the start of the pandemic.⁴

Given this clear potential for the role of government benefits in driving financial inclusion, it's important to consider the efficacy of the delivery method for those benefits.

Prepaid cards are a flexible option that allow users to participate in cashless payment infrastructure without being tied to the stipulations often associated with traditional bank accounts (such as a government ID requirement). Moreover, prepaid cards can allow public agencies to distribute incentives and funds securely and efficiently through a payment method that most Californians are already familiar with – card-based payments. In fact, 32.8% of unbanked households in the U.S. used prepaid cards in 2021, compared to only 5.7% of banked households.⁵

Nonetheless, the characteristics of a prepaid card impact the success and security of a program. California already relies on cards for programs like EBT, CalWORKS, Middle Class Tax Refund, and more. However not all cards are created equally. Without adequate security features built-in to the cards, features that are standard when issued by chartered banks, some \$34.4 million in cash and food aid were stolen from low-income Californians from July 2021 to September 2022.⁶ So, it is critical to select the right tools and establish programs that work both for agencies and the people they serve.

The Opportunity

Cal-ITP is a statewide initiative designed to modernize and create consistency across the state's transportation systems – with a key focus area being improving the payment experience. While the initial focus has been on validation and implementation of enabling payment and data

WHAT ARE PREPAID CARDS?

A prepaid card is a payment card that is preloaded with a specific sum of money. Once the balance is depleted, it necessitates reloading with additional funds to enable further usage. Notably, it is not linked to a bank account or credit line, making it a viable option for unbanked. Nevertheless, it is typically issued by a financial institution and is integrated into the broader financial ecosystem.

Visually, it looks just like a standard debit or credit card and is available in both physical and digital formats. Prepaid cards can be unrestricted (can be used at any merchant that accepts that card type) or restricted (can only be used at certain merchants).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ From [“Thieves drain millions off CalFresh and CalWORKs recipients’ cards, families wait and taxpayers pay”](#) by Jeanne Kuang on January 30, 2023.

sharing technologies, Cal-ITP has increasingly been focusing on creating opportunities for agencies to tackle un- and underbanked barriers through contactless payment card issuance projects. Such issuance demonstrations include testing contactless prepaid cards for transit riders and public electric vehicle charging, respectively.

Valley Clean Air Now – Universal Zero Emission Vehicle (ZEV) Equity Charging Card

In 2022, Cal-ITP supported Valley Clean Air Now (Valley CAN), a non-profit in the Central Valley, in running the Universal ZEV Equity Charging Card demonstration. The Universal ZEV Equity Charging Card, a preloaded and reloadable Mastercard-supported prepaid card provided by dash⁷ can be used to pay for charging at any public charging station. This card is meant to be a convenient way for low-income ZEV drivers, both renters and residents of multi-unit dwellings, to access available subsidies to pay for public ZEV charging, and eventually for all modes of clean transportation. This project was designed to address the importance and demand for a convenient payment option for low-income ZEV owners, identifying and quantifying social and technical barriers, and validating the use of a prepaid card as a mean to address these barriers. Two cohorts totaling approximately 200 participants were issued reloadable cards, with the first using the funds for electric vehicle (EV) charging only, and the second for transit, bike share, and scooters, in addition to public EV charging.

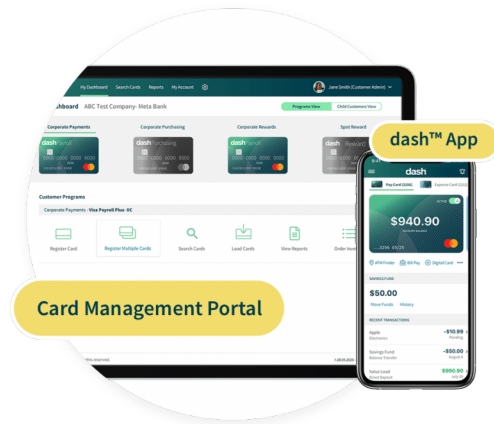


Figure 1. Sample screenshots of Dash the card management portal on desktop and mobile applications available to program administrators and card users.

While the project formally closed at the end of May 2023, to be followed by a detailed report, to date some specific lessons learned for Cal-ITP and its stakeholders include:

Table 1. Valley CAN ZEV Charging Card Lessons-Learned⁸

Topic	Finding	Recommended forward strategies
Initial customer experience	Card activation has been confusing and difficult for some new users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For all programs - ensure customer communication is simple (for example, no finance jargon) and provided in a variety of languages. For prepaid-specific card programs – thoroughly think through the card distribution and activation process,

⁷ <https://getdash.io/>

⁸ Note that this table represents a subset of the project learnings. Cal-ITP will be publishing a detailed report on the Valley CAN Universal ZEV Equity Charging Card project, with comprehensive learnings and recommendations, in Fall 2023

Topic	Finding	Recommended forward strategies
		<p>identifying the potential hurdles on the new user activation journey. If possible, start with a test group first to ensure they understand and are able to follow the process.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For program administrators – If a “high touch” support is required for customers, focus on reducing and/or simplifying the number of steps required to obtain and then activate the card, while ensuring security is maintained. Consider involving a trusted local community organization in customer support.
Data dashboards	As a pilot project, Valley CAN had full access to transaction reports. This allowed administrators to monitor fraud, incentive usage, and insight into ecosystem challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For program administrators – at program inception, build a list of desired insights and data gathering (e.g. to support operations, ongoing program improvements, policy evaluation, industry insights), and work with issuers to ensure that where data is being gathered, stored and shared, the strictest customer privacy principles and policies are adhered to. Note that this at a minimum this likely includes only gathering anonymized and/or aggregated transaction and customer usage data.
Card restrictions	Differences in how Merchant Category Codes (MCCs) are implemented in the payment infrastructure results in some EV charging transactions being difficult to recognize.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For program administrators – when designing restricted cards, ensure that customer communications include a warning about potential poor customer experience and explain what to do in the case that a card has been rejected for payment. Work with provider(s) on processes to report MCC-related card rejection for future program improvement. • Cal-ITP should work with payment networks, acquirers and electric vehicle supply equipment (EVSE) suppliers to address the gaps in MCC implementation across the public EV charging ecosystem, and build a process

Topic	Finding	Recommended forward strategies
		for collecting MCC data from participating issuers and program administrators.

Universal Basic Mobility: Oakland

In late 2021, the Oakland Department of Transportation launched a universal basic mobility pilot using prepaid cards. The program was offered to over 500 East Oakland residents and workers to demonstrate that universal basic mobility (UBM) programs can reduce single-occupant car trips in the area. Administrators distributed \$300 to participants to use on transit, electric bikeshare, electric scooters, and more. The prepaid cards were restricted to include only transportation-related specific merchants. The program resulted in 40% of participants reporting that the way they travelled changed and 23% reporting that they drove alone less since receiving the card. The Oakland UBM resulted in a series of recommendations and outcomes, summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Oakland UBM Lessons-Learned

Challenge	Description	Recommendation
Recruitment and outreach	On-the-ground community outreach proved to be most effective to recruit for participants for the pilot.	Where possible, prepaid programs should leverage community events, community organizations, transportation fairs, and local libraries to educate residents, support sign-up, and provide service testing in a single point of contact to increasing recruitment.
Card distribution method	Administrators chose to mail the prepaid cards to selected participants, but found there to be privacy concerns. Some cards were lost or stolen, adding to program expenses and could have negatively impacted customer experience.	At scale, programs should consider the privacy concerns associated with the selected card distribution method and offer alternatives if possible.
Card usage	The pilot proved successful and showed that most funds went to public transportation.	Oakland Department of Transportation will be distributing funds in late 2023 as a follow-up pilot in West Oakland.

Each pilot produced a spectrum of insights with applicability to the broader context, all of which are elaborated upon in the following chapters.

Recommendations for Prepaid Card Programs

Prepaid card requirements cover two types of users. First, program administrators who design and operate card programs. Their accountabilities include deciding on the general design of the program including funding amounts, purchase restrictions, recipient eligibility and verification methods, and more. Second, card users are those who will ultimately receive and use the prepaid card to make purchases. Each target group may have unique needs related to their prepaid card usage. These differences will be noted where applicable in the following sections.

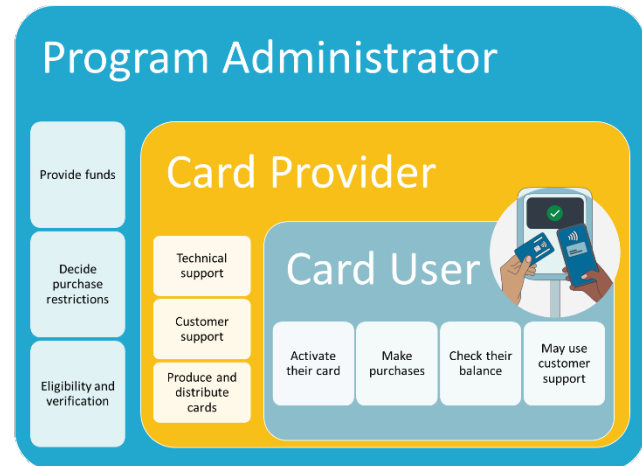


Figure 2. There are unique roles and uses that the administrator, provider, and card user each play. This affects the needs and capabilities each might need from a prepaid

Card Considerations

This section outlines requirements and recommendations pertaining to the basic features and materials of a prepaid card.

- ☐ The prepaid card must have **contactless EMV⁹ chip technology**. This global standard with enhanced security measures will enable programs to keep up with consumer expectations. Note that contactless cards are increasingly being accepted across the US, and are the standard form of bank card payment in both public transit and EV charging.
- ☐ Prepaid card providers should provide program administrators with the option to **customize the card branding**. This may help bolster a sense of legitimacy in the program for card users and can serve as a reminder of the card's specific function and/or restrictions.
- ☐ Written **informational materials** included with the card should include simplified instructions with clear graphics, especially when translations are not possible, to explain activation, use and troubleshooting.
- ☐ Where possible, **card registration and activation** should be **as simple as possible**, and program managers should work with the card provider(s) to avoid card user confusion or frustration from those attempting to use a registered but inactivated card. These processes are defined as follows:
 - **Registration** may ask customers to provide personal information and some card information to create log-in credentials with the prepaid card provider for access to tools such as personal transaction dashboards. This results in a card being linked to a particular card user.
 - **Activation** may prompt card users to provide more card details and create a PIN number. The outcome of this step is that funds on the card are then available for the customer to use.
- ☐ Options to **restrict cards by Merchant Category Code, Merchant ID, or Merchant Name** prior to issuing cards should be available and be as off-the-shelf as possible. For example, this is useful in programs that provide funds for specific types of purchases, like public transportation or EV charging. Program administrators can request that cards only allow transactions for purchases that have transportation-related merchant category codes. Thought should be put towards if program needs are likely to evolve over time, as some prepaid card providers may not be able to change the restriction parameters within the initial contracts and costs. Program administrators can face significant delays if MCC restriction needs evolve past their selected provider's offering.

Privacy restrictions should be discussed and solved between administrators, providers, and partnering organizations at program inception. Such restrictions effects what kind of data is collected and how it is shared. Without a clear research plan prior to finalizing the provider selection, administrators risk being unable to collect key insights in the evaluation phase. Administrators and providers should consider creative solutions. For example, privacy

⁹ EMV stands for Europay, MasterCard, and Visa and represents a global standard for secure credit and debit card transactions using microprocessor chips. cEMV stands for contactless EMV. [EMVCo website](#)



restrictions can be maintained while tracking funds usage by cohort, using arbitrary prefix codes unique to each cohort to do so. These codes can be added to the start of each participant's otherwise unique redemption code, which remains anonymized to program administrators.

Customer Support Considerations

Across prepaid card projects, Cal-ITP has noted that robust customer support is integral to fostering card usage and overall trust in the issuing program. As with any new product, agencies should expect some need for troubleshooting any issues that may arise. This section outlines the basic requirements and recommendations for a prepaid card service that effectively supports users through the customer lifecycle.

- Prepaid card provider must designate and disclose a contact person for the contract to program administrators.
- Uniquely, prepaid cards may have two customer support workstreams – card users and program administrators. The prepaid card **provider must offer customer support that is responsive to both card users and program administration teams**, especially in the early phases of rollout.
 - **Card user support**
 - Prepaid card provider should provide platforms for **account management** (phone, app, web, etc.) and clearly state how card users can receive customer support and to report issues via the channels available
 - Support should be able to address problems like **card activation** issues and navigating struggles at the point of sale. It should be clear to card users what information would be required if they are seeking customer service support, e.g. date of issue, location, merchant/brand (e.g. public transit operator, electric vehicle charging brand), description of the issue.
 - Card users should have the ability to **check their account balance** as well as **flag fraudulent charges**. Account portals and reporting should enable card users to **securely monitor their funds** and individual transactions.
 - **Program administration support**
 - Provider should clarify operational or administrative processes for the funding account.
 - Support should include **anonymized usage and transaction reporting**, and where possible incidents logs that may include instances of incorrect Merchant Category Codes, activation issues, fraud, and point of sale issues.
 - Ensure that **privacy restrictions** are maintained, but program administrators should request access to granular or aggregated data for analysis of funding spend.

Conclusion and Next Steps for Cal-ITP



Via the work done so far in enabling acceptance of contactless payments for travel and demonstrating the use of prepaid cards for distributing travel benefits, Cal-ITP has concluded that prepaid cards can play a useful role in furthering both mobility affordability and financial inclusion.

No product is suited for all use cases, however prepaid cards are a tool that should be considered by administrators. Prepaid cards provide a way of distributing subsidies in a secure and customer-friendly manner and appear to create familiarity with banking products for un- and underbanked recipients. Further, through conversations with stakeholders across the state, there appears to be a strong demand for increased access to this tool. In fact, recent budget and legislative activity have been prescribing prepaid cards in their funding language¹⁰.

Key next steps for Cal-ITP's support of prepaid cards are as follows:

- Publish a **checklist of prepaid card recommendations** for public agency administrators looking to deploy prepaid card programs. A first version of this checklist is shown in the appendix.
- Build a **list of prepaid card providers** that are known by Cal-ITP today as offering these required capabilities, which could be shared with interested program administrators across the state and local governments and non-profit organizations.
- Cal-ITP is in the planning phase for more **follow-on demonstration projects** to investigate specific areas of prepaid functionality that may be of interest to funders and/or administrators. Examples include enabling multiple funding streams to contribute to a single recipient's account, either into a general account or with segregated "wallets". Further, it would be interesting to investigate if it is possible for multiple funding accounts to be supported by a card with separate MCC restrictions and/or spending reports for each funder's program.
- And finally, to make it easy for subsidy program administrators to access prepaid cards simply and efficiently, Cal-ITP is preparing the materials to enable the Department of General Services to create a **state-wide bench of prepaid card products** that could be used by state and local governments, as well as their grantee (and other) administrators to purchase from. This bench would create economies of scale in terms of card purchase pricing, and would reinforce product and service standards, reducing the risk of poor privacy, customer experience or administrative processes.

This is an exciting time for Cal-ITP as it sees the momentum grow for contactless acceptance in transportation across California. Prepaid cards are a tool for agencies to use both to distribute subsidies and create familiarity with banking products for un- and underbanked recipients.

¹⁰ For example: [CARB's Funding Plan for Clean Transportation Incentives](#)

Appendix: Prepaid Card Program Recommendations Checklist

Described below is a checklist of prepaid card attributes that agencies and program administrators should consider when selecting a prepaid card provider and setting up an incentive distribution program. These criteria will ensure that the basic functionality for a robust, effective prepaid-based program are met.

The first section outlines requirements and recommendations related to the basic features and materials of a prepaid card.

Category: Card	
Recommendation	Notes
<input type="checkbox"/> Access to funds: Contactless EMV physical card	Contactless EMV “tap” technology ensures usability in transit, EV charging and other forms of mobility. This requirement should be met by all means.
<input type="checkbox"/> Access to funds: Mobile wallet integration (virtual card)	Clarify the provider’s capability to load the prepaid card onto a mobile wallet such as Apple Pay, Google Pay, etc. It is expected that recipients are increasingly used to mobile payments.
<input type="checkbox"/> Marketing and custom card branding	Confirm what branding options are available for the card and for customer communications materials like the collateral (colors, symbols, text, etc.). Take into consideration that a custom branded card takes significantly more time to be issued, due to many approvals required. Make sure that the name of the program on the card meets the requirements (e.g. “charging card” cannot be used for EV charging as it has another meaning in the financial industry).
<input type="checkbox"/> Communication with cardholders	The provider should be able to provide automated/rule-based communication tools which help reaching out to cardholders, for example, in order to reduce the amount of unspent funds. Make sure that the roles are clear (who communicates what) and what channels are available. Aim for one source of communications as cardholders might get confused if different parties provide them information about the card. We recommend all materials and communications to be mobile-friendly (for example, avoid lengthy PDF instructions that are hard to read or translate on a mobile).
<input type="checkbox"/> Cardholder information collection	Confirm what kind of “Know Your Customer” information is required, e.g. name, address, etc. Ensure that these fit the program needs. The provider might ask for Social Security Number or other data, make sure the expectations and requirements are aligned.

Category: Card	
Recommendation	Notes
<input type="checkbox"/> Expiry of cards	Confirm how long the cards will active, make sure that the program administration is in line with the cards expiry dates. Look for opportunities to negotiate that cardholders in good standing get issued a new card with the unused funds for an extended period.
<input type="checkbox"/> Restrict going into overdraft and ATM cash withdrawals	Confirm that cardholders will not be able to go into overdraft, and clarify if funds should / should not be able to be added by the cardholder, e.g. via online transfer. Cal-ITP recommends also restricting cards from ATM cash withdrawals (if in line with the program goals).
<input type="checkbox"/> MCC, Merchant ID and/or Merchant Name based restrictions	Where card spend restrictions are desired, confirm that existing prepaid products support Merchant Category Code (MCC) or Merchant ID or Merchant Name restrictions, and clarify the process for putting these in place and/or changing the restrictions at any period during the program lifetime.
<input type="checkbox"/> Fraud (risk) prevention, mitigation and resolution	Confirm what specific fraud prevention protocols the provider has in place to reduce the frequency and financial impact of fraud activity (for example, blocking cards after certain number of transactions in a day). Make sure that disbursed funds are FDIC insured ¹¹ .
<input type="checkbox"/> Pre-authorization hold periods	Confirm how many days are pre-authorized funds being hold and aim for negotiating a low period (1-3 days). Customers are not able to access funds while amounts are on hold.
<input type="checkbox"/> Card and replacement card distribution times	Ensure that the provider has written commitment of distributing cards (or replacement cards) within considerable time.

The next section details the customer support angle.

Category: Customer support	
Recommendation	Notes
<input type="checkbox"/> New account info collateral	Confirm what informational materials are included with the card. Ensure that these include simplified instructions with clear graphics, especially when translations are not possible, to explain activation and use.

¹¹ [Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation](#)

<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Account management	Confirm what channels (phone, app, web, etc.) will be provided to card holders for checking account balances and managing account details. Clarify how card users can receive customer support including during activation, navigating struggles at the point of sale, and to report issues via the channels available.
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Fraud management and protection	Card users should easily understand what they need to do to prevent fraud, have the ability to flag fraudulent charges, and should be protected against funds lost due to fraudulent activity as long as they are following the provider's fraud prevention protocols (e.g. protecting your PIN). Ensure that customer and administrator fraud prevention steps are easy to understand and follow
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Translation	All customer support materials and channels should be provided in the language most familiar to cardholders. Make sure that customer communication is simple (for example, no finance jargon) in all languages.
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Capacity and performance KPIs	Ensure that the provider's customer service has enough capacity in all required languages to support cardholders. If possible, set up frequent reviews with the provider to understand customer service performance (KPIs).
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Consider a toll-free number for the program	Consider setting up a toll-free number for the program customer service if the value justifies the cost.
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Consider local (brick and mortar) support	Consider local support and/or collaboration with transit agency offices or community based organizations if the program requires. Make sure that the value justifies the cost.
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> FAQ as cardholder communication and both PR tool	Publish an extensive "Frequently Asked Questions" section on the program website that serves both cardholders but also as a PR tool.

The following section focuses on administrative support and data reporting capabilities.

Category: Administrative support and data reporting	
Recommendation	Notes
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Client account manager	Provider should have a key account manager who is a point of contact for administrative support.
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Funding account	Provider should clarify operational or administrative processes for setting up and managing the funding account. This account holds the program administrator's money, which is not tied to any specific card and is not

	directly available to make transactions with but is instead distributed to individual cards at agreed upon intervals.
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Data reporting: operations	Provider should have a dashboard or similar tool accessible for the program administrator to monitor program operations, including how fast funds are being used, across what types of purchase, if cards are activated, etc.
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Data reporting: research	<p>Provider can be able to export anonymous, granular data for the program administrator for research purposes.</p> <p>Transaction level data should include transaction date and time, value, merchant and if possible, incident logs that may include for example incorrect Merchant Category Code, point of sale or other card usage issues, and fraud tracking.</p> <p>We recommend compiling a research plan well ahead the program start and share data granularity requirements and expected reporting frequency with the provider.</p> <p>Make sure that privacy concerns are managed and align with the provider on how data is being exchanged, especially if the program administrator submits the provider enriched data for analytical purposes.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Surveys, focus group interviews	Consider surveying or having focus group interviews with cardholders, align with the provider if the have tools for such interactions.

The last section summarizes recommendations on the cost element of a prepaid card-based program.

Category: Pricing	
Recommendation	Notes
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Purchase price per card	Clarify pricing details, including volume discounts and any further costs for example distribution, replacement cards or fees related to dormancy or inactivity. Provide the prepaid card provider an estimate of card volumes, funds and ask for the total cost of the program.
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Administrative costs	Clarify pricing for start-up, ongoing or program closeout, branding, extended customer service hours, etc.
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Treatment of expired funds and cancelled cards	Confirm what happens to unused funds at the point of card expiry. Look for opportunities to negotiate that as

	<p>much of these are sent back to the program administrator / sponsor. The treatment of unused funds is usually also depending on the program setup: if the cardholder owns the amounts, it will not be returned to the administrator. If the program administrator owns the funds (and the cardholder can only “spend” it), then it is up to the provider and the administrator to decide on the treatment of unused (or expired) funds.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Fraud	<p>Prepaid card provider and program administrator should work together to define accountability roles for fraud protection, including before and after activation. Provider must ensure that neither cardholders nor the program administrator are financially impacted by any funds lost to fraud as long as both are following the provider’s fraud prevention protocols.</p>