

The \$69 Billion Company That Profits While Elderly Americans Lose Their Savings

Circle K's parent company makes billions a year. Its partnership with a Bitcoin ATM firm has turned hundreds of stores into fraud hotspots.



Steve Beckett trusted Circle K. The 67-year-old retiree from Indiana had stopped at the convenience store chain countless times over the years for gas and snacks.

So, when scammers told him to secure his hacked computer by transferring cash at a nearby Circle K, the familiar red and orange logo gave him comfort. He fed \$7,000 into a Bitcoin ATM inside the store before realizing the money was gone forever.

"You think everything in a convenience store is for your convenience," Beckett told CNN.

He was wrong, and Circle K was profiting off his misery.

'I Hate These Machines'

The FBI received more than 12,000 scam complaints about crypto ATMs this year. Victims lost more than \$330 million between January and November, with thieves using the machines to rapidly convert stolen cash into cryptocurrency held in foreign digital wallets.

Circle K hosts Bitcoin Depot machines at more than 750 of its roughly 7,100 U.S. stores. The partnership, announced in 2021, initially paid Circle K as much as \$700 per month per location, according to people familiar with the deal.

CNN and ICIJ reviewed more than 150 cases of crypto ATM scams at Circle K stores and spoke to 17 employees who witnessed the fraud while at work. One employee saw a man attack a machine with a sledgehammer trying to retrieve his stolen money.

"I hate these machines," a district manager in Niceville, Florida, told police in September after yet another elderly victim was scammed. "I'd like to get them out of the stores."

The frustration extends beyond Florida. At a Circle K in Indiana, managers posted a sign behind the register warning their own employees: "Scam Alert: Don't save money in the register to drop in the Bitcoin machine."

'Zero Risk. Zero Cost. Monthly Revenue.'

Bitcoin Depot pitched its partnership with Circle K using a simple promise to retailers: "Zero risk. Zero cost. Monthly revenue."

Bitcoin Depot now operates more than 9,000 machines across 47 states, making it the largest crypto ATM operator in North America. The company charges fees of up to 20 to 30 percent on transactions.

Circle K represents roughly a quarter of Bitcoin Depot's total revenues, according to securities filings. That makes the convenience chain the crypto ATM company's most important retail partner.

In January, Circle K extended its contract with Bitcoin Depot despite mounting evidence of fraud. The deal runs through mid-2026.

A Circle K spokesperson defended the partnership in a statement to CNN. "As cryptocurrency continues to grow in popularity, like virtually any financial instrument, it is subject to criminal scams that begin outside of retail locations, long before targets approach a crypto ATM," the spokesperson said.

Victims Led to Familiar Stores

The scams follow a pattern. Criminals contact victims, often elderly, through pop-up warnings on computers or phone calls claiming to be from tech support, law enforcement, or government agencies. They spin elaborate stories about hacked accounts or legal troubles. Then they direct victims to feed cash into crypto ATMs at familiar stores.

In August, police in Pace, Florida, found an 86-year-old woman at a Circle K crypto ATM who believed she had "sent money to Trump for his campaign debts." An officer told her she had likely been scammed because "the president would not contact someone through Telegram."

Glenda Mooneyham, a South Carolina widow in her 70s, lost \$30,000 at a Circle K in November 2023. She sued the company, alleging it was "expressly aware" that the machines were used for scams and that employees "made no meaningful effort to intervene."

Some Circle K employees have tried to stop the fraud. Debbie Joy, an assistant manager in Port Orange, Florida, estimates she has intervened in at least 10 scams. She received an award from her city council in April for stopping one in progress.

"It's usually an older or elderly person on the phone with someone and has a bank envelope with them," Joy said. "It's sad really."

Joy has saved the cell phone number of a local police investigator because the crimes happen so often. She believes Circle K should remove the machines.

"Morally, Circle K should kick them out," she said. "Do the right thing."

Other Retailers Have Pulled the Plug

Some businesses have decided the machines are not worth the trouble.

Matthieu Fortin runs a smoke shop in Springfield, Illinois, called Upper Limits Midwest. He signed up to host a crypto ATM from a company called Coinhub for

\$300 per month. The machine sat mostly idle at first. Then the victims started arriving.

"Pretty much 100% of the time when someone was at the machine, they were being scammed," Fortin said.

He wrote to Coinhub that "the machine has brought nothing but problems" and turned it off. The company agreed to remove it.

Fareway Stores, a Midwest grocery chain, took a harder line. The company installed Bitcoin Depot machines at 66 locations in 2024. About eight months later, a Fareway vice president wrote to Bitcoin Depot expressing alarm.

"Police departments have placed crime scene tape around the bitcoin ATMs to lock them down," the vice president wrote. "We do not believe the Bitcoin Depot is doing everything it can to prevent fraud."

Fareway unplugged the machines in February 2025, calling them "instrumentalities of fraud." Bitcoin Depot sued. The parties eventually settled, and the machines are now operating again in Fareway stores.

State Lawmakers Step In

At least 18 states have passed laws targeting crypto ATM scams since 2023. The laws impose daily transaction limits and require refunds for fraud victims in some cases. Bills have been proposed in Florida and Texas.

The regulatory crackdown is hurting Bitcoin Depot's bottom line. The company warned investors in November that fourth-quarter revenue would likely drop about \$50 million from the previous quarter due to new state rules.

Mintz, the founder, said the company would probably move machines out of states with strict regulations. "There's still a lot of geography out there for us to deploy in that has not had a regulatory impact yet," he said.

Circle K's deal with Bitcoin Depot expires in 2026. The company has not said whether it will renew the partnership.

This article draws on reporting from a joint investigation by CNN and the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists.

