



Illinois Lottery Suspends Payouts Until State Lawmakers Settle Budget Stalemate

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People who have hopes of winning a big lottery prize will have to put their dreams on hold in Illinois. The Governor and Illinois lawmakers can't come to terms over a state budget and until they do, lottery prizes over \$25,000 will be delayed. Lottery winners aren't too happy, and some have filed a class action lawsuit against the state.

AUDIE CORNISH, HOST:

Winning a big lottery prize can be a dream come true. In Illinois, it's more like a dream deferred. That's because lawmakers and the state's governor can't agree on a budget. Lottery officials say anyone who wins more than \$25,000 can't be paid until that budget is in place. NPR's Cheryl Corley sent this report.

CHERYL CORLEY, BYLINE: At a corner convenience store on Chicago's North Side, people are coming in to purchase a few groceries, and some are buying those scratch-off lottery cards where you can find out right away if you're a winner.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: Hey.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN: You got something?

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: Yeah.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN: Nice. Would you like...

CORLEY: It's busy over at the lottery terminal too.

JENNIFER COOK: Seventeen, 23...

CORLEY: Jennifer Cook (ph) plays often, wins often - her highest amount - a couple of thousand dollars - and she knows what she'd do if she ever hit it big.

COOK: If I won millions, it would be my kids first and then me (laughter).

CORLEY: Cook says she's heard the news about the lottery delaying payments for big money winners because of the stalemate between the governor and the State Legislature over the Illinois budget.

COOK: I mean, come on. You make millions off the lottery, and you can't cut a check? That's unacceptable.

CORLEY: Illinois does have the money to pay, but big winners are out of luck. Call it a clash of wills between the state's neophyte Republican governor and a Democratically controlled legislature. After months of wrangling, there's still no budget for a fiscal year that began July 1. Most of the vital services in Illinois continue to run in part because of court orders. Comptroller Leslie Munger says without a budget, she can't authorize payments to big lottery winners.

LESLIE MUNGER: Those are not court-ordered payments. They're all going to have to wait in line until we get our budget.

CORLEY: But lottery winners aren't pleased. In a federal lawsuit, they say since July 1, more than two dozen people have won big and are waiting for nearly \$300 million. Rhonda Rasche won \$50,000 and had planned to take a best friend who lost her

mother on a vacation.

RHONDA RASCHE: There was nothing on the ticket that said, well, if the state doesn't have a budget, we can't pay you. If I were running a raffle myself and I was selling tickets and there was a winner and afterwards I told them, oh, sorry, I can't pay you; it's not in my budget right now, I'd probably be in jail. Or I'd be sued or both.

CORLEY: Lottery officials say they can't comment about litigation, but Comptroller Munger has a message for the lottery winners going to court.

MUNGER: Rather than filing a court order, perhaps they should call their legislature and ask them to work on getting a budget in place.

TOM ZIMMERMAN: We want to stop the fraud.

CORLEY: Attorney Tom Zimmerman says that Illinois law requires the lottery to pay prizes first instead of using money to pay for operating the lottery.

ZIMMERMAN: And so if the state is not willing to pay out the prize money, then they should not be selling tickets that have a potential value in excess of \$25,000 knowing full well that when somebody comes to collect, they're not going to pay.

CORLEY: The Illinois Legislature isn't scheduled to return until later this month. But state representative Jack Franks says he's asked the governor to call a special session. And he'll introduce a bill that will allow the comptroller to pay out big lottery awards.

JACK FRANKS: I don't think this can wait 'cause this is a very, very important asset of the state which - we generate almost a billion dollars in revenue a year for the state. And it could dry up overnight if people lose confidence.

CORLEY: Back at that corner grocery store, Amber Stone (ph) says she typically buys a lottery ticket about three times a month. She knows about the payment delay for big winnings, so she's not willing to play now.

AMBER STONE: No, absolutely not, and I'm not going to until this is, like - and I

haven't since I found that out. So...

CORLEY: But others say they will still play in hopes of hitting it big and getting paid, even as the struggle over the Illinois budget continues. Cheryl Corley, NPR News, Chicago.

