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Illinois lottery: You're a winner! Oh. No, you're not!



Scott Olson/Getty Images

A Powerball lottery ticket is printed for a customer at a 7-Eleven store in Chicago. Lottery officials say they can't pay some winners because of a state budget impasse.

by ***Nova Safo*** (</people/nova-safo>)

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Winners of big lottery jackpots in Illinois are finding themselves in an unusual situation: The Illinois Lottery says it cannot pay out jackpots of more than \$25,000, because it lacks the legislative authority absent a new state budget.

That budget is nowhere in sight, as lawmakers and Gov. Bruce Rauner remain locked in a stalemate over how to close a [massive deficit \(https://igpa.uillinois.edu/content/illinois-faces-9-billion-annual-deficit-and-159-billion-ious\)](https://igpa.uillinois.edu/content/illinois-faces-9-billion-annual-deficit-and-159-billion-ious). The state has been operating without a budget since July 1.

The Illinois Lottery's inability to pay has [sparked a class action lawsuit \(http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-lottery-lawsuit-met-20150909-story.html\)](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-lottery-lawsuit-met-20150909-story.html). Attorney Thomas Zimmerman is representing two lottery winners and says at least two more will join the suit this week.

"The state has continued to represent that you will be an instant winner. But, yet, they knew all along that they will not be paying out the prize money," Zimmerman says, arguing that the actions are tantamount to fraud.

What's happening in Illinois is unprecedented, says Patrick Pierce, co-author of the book "[Gambling Politics: State Government and the Business of Betting. \(http://www.amazon.com/Gambling-Politics-Government-Business-Betting/dp/1588262685\)](http://www.amazon.com/Gambling-Politics-Government-Business-Betting/dp/1588262685)"

"It really is a kind of stunning development that a state would fail to pay lottery winners," Pierce says.

The state lottery refused requests for an interview and released a written statement saying that it "cannot comment on pending litigation."

"All winners will be paid in full as soon as Lottery and the Illinois Comptroller have the legislative authority to do so," the Illinois Lottery says.

Zimmerman wants a court to compel officials to pay, because he says it is unclear when a new budget will be instituted.