



North Fort Myers Veterans fighting with state over instant bingo

The Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation said the instant bingo machines at the North Fort Myers VFW are against the law.

Tuesday, July 2nd 2019, 7:19 PM EDT by Rachel Polansky

NORTH FORT MYERS, Fla. - They fought to serve our country. Now, they are fighting with the state of Florida – over a bingo game. The Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation said the instant bingo machines at the North Fort Myers Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) are against the law. If the post does not get rid of them immediately, the VFW could lose its liquor license.

"Here we go, instant bingo," said Ed Hosang, a North Fort Myers veteran. Hosang loves instant bingo.

"It's a lot of fun," said Hosang.

It's like a faster version of bingo where players can find out if they have won or lost in an instant.

In fact, Hosang said the hardest part about the game is giving up.

"My problem is I never know when to cash in," Hosang said. "I just keep playing and playing."

But he doesn't mind losing because all that money goes to the North Fort Myers VFW, which provides services and programs to local vets and service members.

"The VFW does a lot of good for people and this helps them to do it," said Hosang.

In Florida, gambling is only allowed in casinos and poker rooms.

But an exception allows bingo and instant bingo to be played in veterans' halls and other club-like organizations.

"The only distinction is the game distributes the ticket versus an attendant distributing the ticket," said Kevin Jursinski, a Fort Myers attorney representing the VFW.

Jursinski said it's how these vets are playing the game that has landed them in hot water with Florida.

Back when instant bingo first became a thing years ago, players had to get their tickets from an attendant.

Now, they can get tickets from a machine.

"I don't think they [the legislature] could anticipate that there could be electronic equipment that could do the same thing that a person can do but we now know there's a lot of things that can be done by artificial intelligence," said Jursinski.

The Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation's Division of Alcoholic Beverages and Tobacco sent a citation to the VFW last month, telling them to "cease all illegal gambling activity."

The VFW responded with this lawsuit -- because Commander Paul Baldwin believes the state is misinterpreting the law.

While the instant bingo machines may look like slot machines, Baldwin said they don't operate that way. They only allow folks to play instant bingo.

And, they're a big money maker for the VFW.

"All that revenue it [instant bingo] brings in, where does the revenue go?" NBC2 Investigator Rachel Polansky asked Baldwin.

"To the post, it goes to different programs we have," said Baldwin.

The Department of Business and Professional Regulation, the state agency that cited the VFW released a statement.

"It is the position of DBPR not to provide comment on any ongoing or current litigation."

The North Fort Myers VFW filed that lawsuit in June. The Attorney General's Office is expected to respond in the coming weeks.

© Copyright 2019 WBBH/WZVN (Waterman Broadcasting). All rights reserved.