



BUREAU OF GAMBLING CONTROL

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Internet Cafés

With increasing frequency, so-called “Internet cafés” that sell Internet time or phone cards in conjunction with a “promotional sweepstakes,” are operating throughout California. The “sweepstakes aspect” of the Internet cafés permits customers to play gambling-themed games on computers to win cash prizes. The Bureau of Gambling Control (Bureau) considers Internet cafés that offer these types of sweepstakes to be illegal gambling operations.

Method of Operation:

In general, Internet cafés are located in storefront strip malls, though they can also be standalone establishments. Numerous computer terminals or stations are located inside each Internet café. Customers generally purchase Internet time or phone time using a magnetic striped card provided by the Internet café. After making a purchase of Internet time or phone time, customers swipe the magnetic card through a card reader at a computer terminal or station inside the Internet café to play gambling-themed games. Along with the Internet time or phone time, customers receive sweepstakes “entries” or “credits” based upon the amount spent (e.g., 100 sweepstakes entries for \$1.00 of Internet time purchased). The sweepstakes entries are displayed on the computer screens as “credits.” The customer then has the option to select one of several gambling-themed games and makes bets with the credits. Customers who win prizes can cash in any winnings, or use the winnings to purchase additional internet time and sweepstakes entries. Cash prizes ranging from \$1.00 to as much as \$4,000 are paid out daily. Customers may be able to receive and play 100 credits per 24-hour period for free, but must purchase Internet time or phone card time to obtain additional sweepstakes credits to play the games once they have played the free credits.

In addition to the onsite computers, a server running the sweepstakes software will typically be present, although a remote location server might also be used. The software operates and controls the game play and pay outs at the computer terminals and maintains customer information. The software is most often provided by out-of-state companies and is designed with the intent of circumventing state gambling laws. It can reasonably be anticipated that this software will be continuously modified to avoid detection and analysis in an attempt to prevent prosecution.

Existing Law:

Computers that offer the sweepstakes generally described above are illegal “slot machine[s] or device[s]” prohibited by Penal Code section 330b, subdivision (d). (See also *People ex rel. Lockyer v. Pacific Gaming Technologies* (2000) 82 Cal.App.4th 699 [a vending machine dispensing pre-paid telephone cards with “a sweepstakes feature” and prizes determined by a pre-set computer program is an unlawful gambling device under Penal Code section 330b].) Penal Code section 330a, subdivision (a), describes as prohibited “any slot or card machine, contrivance, appliance or mechanical device” on “which money or other valuable thing is staked or hazarded.” (See also Pen. Code, § 330.1.) Business and Professions Code sections 17200, et seq., and 17500, et seq., provide for civil penalties and other remedies against these Internet café operations for unlawful business practices and false advertising. Penal Code section 335a states, “Any and all money seized in or in connection with such machine or device shall, immediately after such a machine or device has been so destroyed, be paid into the treasury of the city or county.” The operator may sue for recovery of the devices within 30 days after issuance of the notice of intended destruction under Penal Code section 335a.

Assistance:

The Bureau will assist California law enforcement agencies working toward prosecution or pursuing civil or administrative actions in connection with Internet café gambling operations. Assistance may encompass advice, Bureau personnel and equipment, search and arrest warrant examples, and other experienced assistance with enforcement operations. The local law enforcement agency will retain the lead role and be responsible for evidence retention, seizure of funds, and prosecution, or civil or administrative action against the establishment.

This advisory is for informational purposes only and is not intended to be legal advice.

For more information regarding this advisory, contact the California Department of Justice, Bureau of Gambling Control at (916)227-3584