

Bingo

Until 1980, bingo was an illegal form of gambling in the State of Georgia and because of this, the Archdiocese prohibited parishes, schools, agencies and institutions from participating in bingo. After legalization, the Archdiocese discouraged the use of bingo as a fund raising opportunity, and instead, encouraged the promotion of stewardship as a way of life for all in the Archdiocese. Today, we are seeing the fruits of active stewardship - in parishes throughout north and central Georgia. Stewardship "is" a way of life.

Please be assured, that as an archdiocese we are not moving away from stewardship. However, as a fundraiser, bingo may be appropriate in some situations. The decision that a pastor makes to pursue bingo should not be taken lightly. Our attorneys have informed us that under Georgia law, any person who operates a bingo game without a valid license commits the offense of commercial gambling. O.C.G.A. § 16-12-62. Commercial gambling is a felony and is punishable by imprisonment for one to five years, or by a fine not to exceed \$20,000.00, or both. O.C.G.A. § 16-12-22(b). Each parish that chooses to operate a bingo game must abide by the applicable Georgia Code and the rules of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI). It is the responsibility of the pastor to ensure that the parish is in compliance with the regulations of the GBI.

Parishes wishing to explore bingo should read the following excerpt from the GBI web site and then view the full requirements for bingo operations located at www.state.ga.us/gbi/bingo/bingobk.html. After reading the legal requirements to operate bingo, if the parish still wishes to pursue bingo, then the pastor should submit a letter to the Archbishop requesting approval. In granting the request, the Archbishop will require the following:

State Requirements:

1. All requirements of the State of Georgia and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation must be followed.
2. No exceptions to the State regulations can be made.

Archdiocesan Requirements:

1. The bingo license must be in the name of the parish. No other non-profit entity can operate bingo on parish grounds
2. Annually, the Pastor will submit a certification letter to the CFO of the Archdiocese stating dates on which the bingo session operated and stating that, on each of those dates, all the regulations were carefully followed
3. Annually, the CFO of the Archdiocese will contact the GBI to ensure that parishes engaging in bingo have complied with reporting and other requirements
4. The proceeds from bingo (receipts less prizes) are an assessable form of income for the parish

From the GBI website:

“Bingo is one of only three legal forms of gambling in Georgia. The other two legal forms of gambling are the Georgia Lottery and raffles.

In 1980, the Georgia General Assembly passed legislation that gave the Georgia Bureau of Investigation the authority to enforce and regulate bingo. There are currently 193 active and 41 inactive bingo operations in Georgia. In 2006, the average game grossed \$143,406 annually with many games located in metropolitan areas grossing over \$300,000 annually. Collectively in 2006, bingo licensees grossed over \$24 million. During this period, prizes paid to players totaled over \$16 million and charitable contributions by bingo licensees totaled \$810,669.

Georgia's bingo statute is one of the most restrictive in the country. Georgia only allows \$1,500 per session or \$3,000 per week to be paid in prizes. The amount of the prizes directly relates to the amount bet by bingo players and limits the profits that can be made by the operator.

Annually, the GBI investigates approximately 5 new license applications and 2,000 new bingo workers/officers. Bingo licensees must maintain records of all bingo receipts and expenditures, prizes paid out and the names and addresses of winners. Bingo equipment cannot be altered and must be in good working condition. All bingo operators must be active members of the licensed organization and approved by the GBI before they are allowed to assist with bingo operations. A database of 12,500 approved individuals is currently maintained by the GBI and updated daily.

The majority of Georgia's bingo operators, consisting of veterans groups and service clubs, run their bingo games as a fund raising activity as intended by law. However, bingo is the lifeblood for some organizations and the main purpose for their existence. Although Georgia's bingo games are on a restricted scale, bingo is a cash flow business that leaves ample room for misuse.

Bingo is not the only form of gambling found in some of these organizations. Illegal lotteries, pull-tabs and slot machines have been used by some to generate additional income. Since 1981 about 50 organizations have lost their bingo license through suspension or revocation for repeated rule violations or for conducting illegal gambling activities. Many of these organizations and their officers have been charged with commercial gambling or related crimes.”