

# State cracks down on charity poker games

9 people busted in Wyoming game gone rogue

By Henry Erb

Updated: Tuesday, October 29, 2013, 6:31 PM EDT

Published: Tuesday, October 29, 2013, 6:15 PM EDT

WYOMING, Mich. (WOOD) - The popularity of charity poker games has exploded since the State first allowed them nearly a decade ago. Now, the State thinks the games are out of control and is starting to crack down.

In a Wyoming courtroom Tuesday morning, the last of nine people busted in a charity poker game gone rogue pleaded guilty.

All nine were sentenced to \$475 in fines and 6 months probation. The professional operator running the game at Woody's on Clyde Park Avenue had his license suspended.

Gov. Rick Snyder used an executive order to take enforcement out of the hands of the Lottery Commission and give it to the Gaming Control Board last year. Richard Kalm, who runs the Gaming Control Board, told Target 8 investigators in a Tuesday phone interview that what happened at Woody's is an example of what his agents are seeing statewide.

"An employee of the supplier was illegally selling the chips to the tune of about \$15,000 or \$16,000 to bolster the game and bring people in," Kalm explained. "That's completely illegal."

State agents did 1,200 inspections last year and found 480 violations. Now, they're going undercover.

Kalm says they have found problems with integrity of games and bogus record keeping.

"The sad part is we're having a hard time finding places operating legally, following the Bingo Act and the rules. It's easier for us to find violations, and it's really kind of disheartening," Kalm said.

Kalm says the charity poker games were worth \$7 million in 2004. Within a few years, they were bringing in \$200 million.

Professional operators started running the games and the charities were losing control, he says. In some cases, the professionals were using the charities as cover to run illegal games.

"I tell our people, treat everybody as if they were from the state. That's the easiest way to do it," Joe Sack, who runs legitimate poker rooms at the Lincoln Country Club and Eastbrook Lanes, said.

Most of the charities he raises money for are schools or school booster clubs. He says poker has replaced bingo as the popular fundraiser.

"Poker is a lot of fun for a lot of people and it's a great way for the charities to make money for good causes," Sack said.

He says the state crackdown scared a lot of people. That the number of poker rooms around the state has already dropped from 170 to 38. The survivors are the ones who run the games right, he says.

"But for the most part, if you're running a good program, you don't have anything to worry about," he said.

But he thinks Gaming Control Board proposals for tighter regulations could cut down on the charities' chance to make money. Some of the charities are protesting.

But the state says it's trying to return control to the charities.

"Every time we go into one of these places and discover illegal gambling or gambling outside the scope of the charity, they're cheating the charity and we just can't stand for that," Kalm said.

Some Michigan casinos say they are in favor of the crackdown on charity games. The state has been accused of doing their bidding, but the Gaming Control director says he has not been pressured by the casinos.

## Most Popular Stories

Ottawa Co. deputy temporarily suspended

Storm Team 8 forecast

HDPS: Masked gunman robs gas station

Leroy Township school on lockdown

Parapro in sex case rejects plea deal