

The Palm Beach Post

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Lottery suspends sales at 11 more stores after Post investigation

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The Florida Lottery, suspecting fraud, has suspended sales at 11 more stores, bringing the total to 14 since a Palm Beach Post investigation revealed startling patterns of winners.

Two of the stores were owned by winners profiled in The Post's investigation.

Amit and Nita Thakker have owned or operated various stores in and around Gainesville for years. Since 2005, they've cashed in 226 big lottery prizes worth more than \$560,000.

Lottery officials seized equipment and turned off the terminals at their current store, the Williston Corner Market, about 30 minutes southwest of Gainesville.

"The Florida Lottery will not tolerate fraudulent activity by our players or retailers," a lottery news release stated.

If the lottery's investigation confirms that store owners or clerks fraudulently sold or redeemed tickets, the lottery will terminate their contract. They could face criminal charges as well, according to the news release.

The Post's investigation found lottery winners who were cashing in tickets against incredible odds. The most prolific winner, for example, was cashing in a ticket worth \$600 or more every 11 days, on average, for years.

The winning patterns were red flags that led other lotteries to uncover ticket theft by store employees, ticket cashers who helped people avoid paying taxes or child support and even criminals using the lottery to launder money.

One of the prolific winners told The Post that he'd been cashing in tickets for other people, a first-degree misdemeanor punishable by up to a year in jail.

Fort Pierce gas station owner Vipul Shukla has cashed in tickets 149 times, collecting \$323,000, since 2006.

He previously told The Post that he'd been cashing in tickets for others, but he had stopped.

The lottery said Thursday it had suspended his store, the Midway Food Mart, 1200 W. Midway Road.

Seven of the suspended stores are in the St. Petersburg area. A Monday report by a Tampa-area TV station found that the owner of all seven stores had an unusually high number of wins.

Two other stores also had disproportionate wins by their owners.

The name of the man listed as the owner of La Rampa Supermarket, 2925 NW 27th Ave., in Miami, matches the name of the store's top winner in lottery records. He has won 11 times at his own store since 2008, collecting nearly \$36,000.

The man listed as the owner of the A&L Discount Beverage in Ocala has won at his store 17 times for \$21,500 since 2006, lottery records show.

Both men had even more winning tickets from other stores.

The Post's investigation, published March 30, found that six of the 10 most prolific winners in Florida since 2003 were store clerks or owners.

The chances of winning any lottery prize worth \$600 or more are remote. Only one in every 8,700 scratch-off tickets sold is worth that much, and the rate is far worse for online games such as Play 4.

Mathematicians calculated that many of the top winners would have to spend millions to have a low chance of winning hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The Thackers had said they had discovered a loophole in the lottery that allowed them to turn a profit every year playing the game. Experts and lottery officials discredited their explanation.

After suspending three Pompano Beach stores identified in The Post stories on April 2, the lottery three weeks later permanently revoked their licenses. The lottery said someone at the stores broke the law and won't ever be allowed to sell tickets again.

The Post found that the lottery wasn't following some industry best practices, including asking winners whether they work at stores that sell lottery tickets.

While the lottery has not adopted that rule, officials said they would adopt software to track frequent winners and install more self-checking machines at its outlets so that players don't have to rely on store clerks to tell them if they have winning tickets.