

Illinois casinos to reopen July 1 after coronavirus shutdown

Written by Administrator
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All bets are back on in Illinois starting next week.

Following an unprecedented three-month shutdown due to the coronavirus pandemic, Gov. J.B. Pritzker's administration on Thursday gave the state's 10 casinos and thousands of video gambling machine operators the green light to welcome back bettors next Wednesday.

That's a few days behind other crowd-dependent industries reopening Friday with the statewide introduction of Phase 4, but it's welcome news for casino executives eager to get the slots rolling again — and for the Democratic governor to jumpstart gaming revenue for a COVID-19-riddled budget.

"I'm not an expert about how many times you need to wipe down a video gambling terminal to make it safe," Pritzker said during a Loop news conference. "Like other activities, we're trying to do these things in measures, with lots of health and safety guidance. The No. 1 driving factor is people should not get sick while doing those activities."

All in-person gambling operations have been shuttered since March 16, the first time the casinos had closed for a sustained period since the state's first riverboat hit the water three decades ago. Ditto for the 36,000-plus video slots that sit in almost 7,300 bars, restaurants and rest stops, and now make up the state's top gaming revenue source outside the Illinois Lottery.

The shutdown left more than 5,000 casino employees out of work, and it shut off critical funds for the cash-strapped state. Casinos raked in more than \$470 million from March through June 2019, with \$114 million of it going to the state, according to Illinois Gaming Board records. Gamblers lost almost \$587 million at video slots over the same time frame, resulting in about \$147 million for the state.

It'll take a long time for gambling numbers to rise back to those levels, if they ever do. Gamblers will return to a different experience in the age of COVID-19.

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Earlier this month, as casinos resumed operations in Indiana and Wisconsin, the Illinois Gaming Board issued a set of reopening guidelines and required casinos and terminal operators to submit their own plans for approval.

Each casino was capped at 50% capacity, though that's subject to change "depending on public health conditions at any time," the Gaming Board said, and everyone has to "have some type of face covering."

Casinos must provide free personal protective equipment and daily health screenings to employees, post signage reminding gamblers about social distancing and "proper hand washing," and regularly disinfect all gaming equipment including dice, chips, cards and roulette wheels.

"The casinos are gonna be some of the safest places people can be," Illinois Casino Gaming Association executive director Tom Swoik said. "All of them are being totally disinfected. They're gonna have people continuously monitoring the machines and the tables, wiping every possible surface down."

At those video slots outside casinos, operators need to set up physical partitions between the machines or space them out, among other precautions.

The lights will officially go back on at 9 a.m. July 1.

Read more <https://chicago.suntimes.com/politics/2020/6/25/21303682/illinois-casinos-reopen-coronavirus-shutdown-pritzker>