

MASSACHUSETTS GAMING COMMISSION

FORUM ON PROBLEM GAMBLING

JUNE 25, 2012

Good Afternoon Commissioners. Thank you for providing me the opportunity to share with you a perspective on effectively addressing problem gambling issues. My perspective is drawn from my experience at a state level as administrator of problem gambling services at the Iowa Department of Public Health, and at a national level as President of the Association of Problem Gambling Service Administrators and Board member of the National Center for Responsible Gaming.

It's important for you to understand that my stance is neither for nor against gambling but one that hopes to mitigate the harms, including preventing, treating and supporting persons in recovery while at the same time embracing the potential economic and entertainment benefits.

Partnerships

I've reviewed the Acts Establishing expanded gambling in the Commonwealth and congratulate you on crafting thoughtful and detailed measures to address problem gambling.

- On-site space for counseling services,
- employee training on problem gambling identification,
- extensive efforts to deter underage gamblers on the floor and
- a subcommittee on addictions that allows the input of the Mass Council and Department of Public Health
- A public health trust fund

These are bold and will certainly place the Commonwealth at the front of the pack nationally in efforts to address problem gambling.

The Acts provide a fine blueprint but rely on the collaboration of many parties with many interests to be effective. This is no small task. Those providing prevention and treatment can easily see those employed by the gaming industry as barriers to their success and vice versa.

But that's not really true...

I prefer a different approach – that success at preventing and treating problem gambling depends upon relationships from all aspects of the gaming industry. Where are gamblers – well at casinos. A majority of helpline callers in Iowa cited the casino as source of referral. And conversely, gaming depends on prevention and treatment providers to help compulsive gamblers and minimize any potential harm through effective prevention strategies. A win/win and the entire community benefits. I want to give you a few examples of effective partnerships.

1) National Problem Gambling Awareness Week and National Responsible Gambling Awareness week.

2) A few years ago the Iowa Department of Public Health hosted a forum on gambling issues and invited our state funded treatment and prevention providers, employees of all levels from Iowa casinos, leadership from the Iowa Gaming Association and Iowa Racing and Gaming Association. Part of the objective of the forum was to develop a training outline to be used by our providers as they train casino employees about problem and pathological gambling. Why? Because I recognize no one wants to see their community or its members hurt by gambling. Being in our respective positions, we've all seen the potential harms gambling can cause. And in part from these experiences, we are all experts and bring a piece of the puzzle to the table. Helping persons hurt by gambling it can't be done alone. It's a shared responsibility. As a side note; during the forum the issue of self-exclusion came up. A hot issue was whether or not Iowa should offer time limited as an option to life-time. The room was split on the issue and you couldn't tell who was coming from the provider side and the casino side.

3) The National Center for Responsible Gaming provides the other example of an effective partnership but at a national level.

The NCRG's mission is to help individuals and families affected by gambling disorders by supporting peer-reviewed, research on pathological and youth gambling; encouraging the application of research findings to improve prevention, diagnostic, intervention and treatment strategies; and advancing public education about gambling disorders and responsible gaming. All these efforts are supported by the American Gaming Association.

Continuum of services

The basis of an effective public health approach can be summed up in a popular truism of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: Prevention works, Treatment is effective and People recover

Prevention

It only makes sense that if we can help people avoid problematic gambling behaviors that will result in harm to themselves, their family and community – then we should. Let evidence guide these prevention strategies. Massachusetts is fortunate to have the Mass Council on Compulsive Gambling. They are a model program in the nation.

1. Develop a plan that provides information to the general public.
2. Employ an education program of risks and responsibilities for targeted and at risk groups
 - a. Last fall IDPH released a study of gambling behaviors and attitudes of adult lowans. The study found that 13 percent of adult lowans, 16.6 percent of males and 17.4 percent of adults have experienced at least one problem gambling symptom during the past 12 months. A problem gambling symptom doesn't have to be life altering but can include spending more than anticipated and regret or shame about how one gambled. Admittedly, many of these people don't need treatment but are certainly exhibiting risky gambling behavior and could benefit from targeted prevention education about the risks of gambling and guidelines for responsible gambling.

3. Help key individuals, including casino employees, healthcare providers and other human service professionals understand compulsive gambling and able to identify problem gambling behavior.
4. Support community activities that provide alternative forms of entertainment to gambling.
5. Create policies that assist problem gamblers and contain gambling as a form of entertainment.

Treatment

Quality treatment for problem gamblers and the people in their lives is an essential Pillar of a continuum of care. Conservatively 1% of persons from MA are compulsive gamblers. This may not seem like a large number but its thousands of individuals with lives devastated by gambling and they need help now.

And the ripple effect is great. A study done in the past year in Iowa found that 22% of adult Iowans and 34% of those with one or more problem gambling symptom have been negatively affected by the gambling behavior of a family member, friend or co-worker. That's 1% impacting more than 22% of the population.

Quality treatment means that it's provided by trained, well qualified and compassionate persons. It's accessible, affordable and convenient. Effective treatment can change lives....check that, it HAS saved lives. Follow up studies have found significant improvements in the lives of persons who seek treatment for problem gambling. An ongoing study of gambling treatment services in IA have found that for persons who seek help:

- 86% strongly agree with the statement that their gambling behavior is much less compared to when they entered treatment.
- 100% report their life is better at discharge than prior to entering treatment.
- Other significant findings show reduced debt, higher rates of employment, better overall social functioning.

When the person's health improves the communities health improves.

Recovery Support.

Whether through treatment or other recovery paths, people recover and their efforts to do so need to be supported. Gamblers Anonymous is a wonderful resource but not the only way people seek support in recovery. Other options need to be available and these options need to be client driven, client selected and flexible. Examples include:

- financial counseling,
- rental assistance,
- life coaching,
- Trained peer recovery coaches have been wonderfully successful for persons in recovery from substance abuse and show great promise for persons in recovery from compulsive gambling.
- utility assistance,
- transportation assistance,
- assistance in achieving personal wellness.

Just as there is no one path TO recovery and there is no one path IN recovery.

Marketing

A cornerstone to Iowa's primary prevention efforts has been a sustained marketing campaign. For over 20-years this campaign has highlighted the signs, symptoms and impact problem gambling can have and how to access help. During most of this time, the campaign has been state-wide, covering all 99 Iowa counties with a minimum of two forms of media. This, combined with the education efforts by providers and effective partnerships with Iowa casinos and Lottery has resulted in a state where generally it's citizens are better informed about problem gambling, can more easily talk about the issue, back state-funded efforts and have broad awareness of how to access the services available.

- Two-thirds of adult lowans say they are extremely or moderately confident they would recognize the signs that a friend or family member has a gambling problem.
- 90% of adult lowans said they are aware of the gambling helpline – 1800BETSOFF.
- 1 in 4 of those who have experienced one or more problem gambling symptoms during the past 12 months said they have talked with someone about their gambling.
- 85% said it was important or very important to provide public funding to make problem gambling treatment available,
 - 91% support public funding to educate young people about the risks of gambling,
 - 85% support public funding to inform adults about the problems gambling can cause and
 - 76% support public funding to provide information about responsible gambling.
 - Based on past 12 month prevalence data, more lowans with gambling problems are 25% more likely to access treatment services than the national average.

Not surprisingly, sustained and successful marketing campaigns aren't cheap and become controversial in a difficult economic climate. In the fiscal year that starts July 1 the campaign will be one quarter of what it was four years ago. We have adapted the campaign but our ability to employ this primary prevention strategy and reach the number of people we have in the past has been severely compromised.

As the Commonwealth begins this endeavor, I encourage you to see the marketing campaign as an essential component of the efforts to mitigate the harms associated with gambling.