

Problem Gambling

The Indiana State Legislature is now in session and four bills have been introduced that would expand gambling. Recently there has been much public discussion of the increased number of addicted gamblers that would result if this is done. It is an opportune time to examine this issue.

Illegal gambling has always existed in Indiana. Since 1988 the Indiana State Legislature has approved various types of legalized gaming; a State lottery, two horse racing tracks, two pari-mutuel betting sites and eleven casinos. Indiana is not alone in doing this. Forty-eight States have now legalized some form of gambling. This occurred as States sought ways to raise revenue without raising taxes. Gaming provides significant State budget revenue, economic development and employment.

The legislation that allows casinos also provides for a percentage of annual gaming tax revenues to be used for funding problem gambling prevention and treatment. Currently only fifty percent of these dollars are used for problem gambling initiatives and the remaining funds are directed to other State services. This situation has not allowed for the development of a comprehensive plan to address problem gambling as the Legislature surely intended. It is now time mandate that these dollars be directed to their intended and needed purpose. Any increase in gambling venues will likely result in an increased number of problem gamblers, therefore, it is imperative that any legislation that expands legalized gambling include provisions for dedicated funding for problem gambling initiatives.

While it can be said that gambling has been very good to Indiana, it has not been good for all Hoosiers. Various studies indicate that as many as four percent of gamblers will develop a gambling addiction. Private insurance does not cover treatment for this problem. The Indiana Family and Social Services Administration is charged with providing treatment for Hoosiers with a gambling addiction, but barriers exist to the delivery of these services. Too few credentialed counselors exist in Indiana and many areas lack a nearby treatment program. Access to State funded treatment is subject to a financial means test, which generally excludes about eighty percent of those seeking help via the Indiana Problem Gambling Help Line. Problem gamblers rarely seek help until all of their resources have been lost. While they may still have a job, they do not have the resources to pay for treatment. When Indiana decided to profit from legalized gambling, the State also assumed the moral responsibility to provide these treatment services. The administrative decision to require a means test for treatment must be rescinded. This is not a question of lack of resources but a question of lack of a will to do what is right for Hoosiers.

Legalized gambling will continue because of the economics benefit it provides our State. Problem gamblers will not magically disappear. It is important that current resources be used as intended and that any legislation that allows a further expansion of gambling include dedicated resources to support prevention, public education and expanded treatment services. Failure to do this will result in more lost opportunities to help those with a gambling problem and more Hoosier families and communities will continue to pay an unnecessary price.

The Indiana Council on Problem Gambling is neither for nor against legalized gambling. The Council exists to ensure that sufficient resources are available in Indiana to address problem gambling. For help for a gambling problem, call: 1- (800) 994-8448. For information on problem gambling, visit: www.indianaproblemgambling.org.

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