

As online gambling starts in N.J., some worry about addiction's powerful grip

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ATLANTIC CITY — For many, the introduction of online gambling in New Jersey tomorrow will mean fun and entertainment without the hundred-mile bus ride to Atlantic City or the car trip to Pennsylvania.

It will mean playing a hand of poker while sipping a cup of joe at the breakfast table. It will mean spinning the roulette wheel on a commuter train rumbling toward Manhattan. It will mean yanking the one-arm bandit from the comfort of the living room sofa, a Sunday afternoon football game on in the background.

But to others, it could mean hunching over a glowing computer screen in a dark basement, playing a half-dozen hands of poker at a time as a life's savings slips into oblivion. It could mean gambling addicts unable to escape their vice will be followed around by a casino that fits in their pocket.

At least that is the fear of advocates worried about compulsive gamblers. While regulators and casino executives say countless new safeguards will be a part of online betting — more than could ever exist in casinos — those advocates think digital gaming will create a new generation of addicts and draw those in recovery back to the table.

"It's not an issue of could or might. It will," said Les Bernal, executive director of Stop Predatory Gambling, which opposes government-backed gaming. "The evidence is overwhelming that internet gambling — of all forms of gambling — is the most addictive."

New Jersey is entering the fifth day of a test run of more than a dozen online gambling websites operated by Atlantic City casinos. If state regulators are satisfied with the results, the sites will be opened to the general public tomorrow.



New Jersey is four days into a test run of more than a dozen online gambling websites operated by casinos in Atlantic City. If state regulators are satisfied with the results of the test, the sites will be opened up to the general public tomorrow. Star-Ledger file photo

The launch will mark the largest expansion of gambling in the Garden State since the first casino opened its doors in 1978, and it comes just nine months after Gov. Chris Christie signed a law permitting it.

The governor — who vetoed earlier versions of the legislation and approved it only after lawmakers agreed to provide more funds to combat gambling addiction and toughen oversight — has set the tone for regulators and the casinos.

Christie said he would approve of online gambling only if the economic benefits were carefully weighed "against the risks of addiction, corruption and improper influence."

"This was a critical decision, and one that I did not make lightly," Christie said in a statement after signing the law.

David Rebeck, director of the state Division of Gaming Enforcement, said "nobody is more concerned" about compulsive gambling "than the governor of this state."

"You go back and read his conditional veto and his statement to what the division has to do," Rebeck, the top casino regulator in the state, said last week in Atlantic City. "I have clear direction from the governor, and I'm not going to upset him. We will have the strongest standards in play in the internet gaming world for compulsive gambling. Period."

'INVISIBLE PROBLEM'

But advocates are still worried. After all, there are an estimated 350,000 compulsive gamblers in New Jersey — more than the number of people living in Somerset County. And with the attraction of young people to technology, they say it's inevitable that the figure will grow as casinos market their new products.

"Ninety-five percent of the people who are doing this will have no problem at all," said Arnie Wexler, a longtime recovering gambling addict and the former executive director of New Jersey's Council on Compulsive Gambling. "But the five percent who do have a problem, they're going to destroy their lives."

He also worries that the convenience and ease of access will force an already private affliction deeper below the surface: "This disease is a killer. It's hidden. It's invisible. There's no track marks. There's no dilated pupils. There's no smell."

The launch comes as one of the country's richest casino moguls, Sheldon Adelson, is preparing a campaign to make internet gambling — which became available in Nevada and Delaware earlier this year — illegal in America. Adelson is seen here in Madrid, Spain, in November. EPA/Perez Herrera

The launch comes as one of the country's richest casino moguls, Sheldon Adelson, is preparing a campaign to make internet gambling — which became available in Nevada and Delaware earlier this year — illegal in America.

The Washington Post reported last week that Adelson, one of the top Republican donors during last year's presidential election, will seek to paint online betting as a menace to children and the poor.

His Coalition to Stop Internet Gambling has already hired former Denver Mayor Wellington Webb; former U.S. Sen. Blanche Lincoln, an Arkansas Democrat; and former New York Gov. George Pataki, a moderate Republican, the Post reported.

In Atlantic City last week, gaming executives and the legislator responsible for New Jersey's internet betting law were dismissive of Adelson.

"Sheldon Adelson is trying to stop us in our tracks here in Atlantic City by banning internet gaming, and he's going to spend a lot of money lobbying for it," state Sen. Raymond Lesniak said Thursday as he announced a bill that would further expand the industry. "And his justification is this is going to hurt poor people. Sheldon Adelson is concerned about poor people? If Sheldon Adelson really was concerned about poor folks, first of all, he would ban lottery sales."

SAFEGUARDS

Even those in the gaming industry, though, concede internet betting will attract people who struggle with addiction.

At the same time, they say all they have done is take a black-market industry already operating illegally in this state and give it oversight and legitimacy.

That means ensuring that players are at least 21 years old and that they have not chosen to self-exclude themselves from gambling in New Jersey. Many people can just walk into a casino and

start gambling, no questions asked, executives say. On the internet, that won't happen — websites will use multiple forms of identification.

The gaming websites allow players to set spending, deposit and time limits. And the websites also record every hand of poker and every pull of a slot, and watch for signs that someone is losing control. Several companies said they intend to mail and call users who appear to be in trouble and ask if they want help.

"We don't want problem gamblers. We don't want a bad reputation," Brian Mattingley, chief executive of 888 Holdings, the partner to Caesars Entertainment, said in a recent interview in Manhattan. "We want people to come on, enjoy recreationally — enjoy the fun of playing roulette, enjoy the fun of playing poker — and actually ensure that you are spending within your limits."

The websites allow players to set spending, deposit and time limits, as seen here on partypoker's New Jersey platform. Provided by partypoker

Still, there's no requirement the casinos do that. And even if they do, it's an offer for help — there's no guarantee a player would take it. If it happens, that's great, said Donald Weinbaum, executive director of the state Council on Compulsive Gambling. But he has doubts.

"In the end, we're going to be watching this very closely, and it's hard to know how this will develop and whether there's really an incentive for casinos to flag people and suggest they take a timeout and exclude themselves," Weinbaum said. "It could be done. But will it be done?"

*A list of casinos and websites approved to participate in the online gambling test run can be found on the state **Division of Gaming Enforcement's website.***

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