

# Thousands treated annually for addiction

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With casinos dotting the coast and video-poker machines seemingly every truck stop, bar and restaurant, gambling is a billion-dollar business and a big part of the social scene in south Louisiana.

But that business comes with a price. Some of that gambling revenue is used by the state to treat the hundreds of thousands of Louisiana residents who eventually become addicted to gambling.

According to the Louisiana Association on Compulsive Gambling, about 4.4 percent of adults over 21 in Louisiana, or as many as 159,000 people, demonstrate problematic or pathological gambling.

The problem is even worse among young adults. About 14.3 percent of adults between 18 and 21 have problematic or pathological gambling issues. That's as many as 23,000 people.

Terrebonne Parish is ranked as one of the top parishes in the state for the number of gambling facilities per person. And one of the biggest problems for local gamblers is video poker, said Renee Middleton director of the Louisiana Association on Compulsive Gambling.

In 2010, the last year data was available from the state's Gaming Control Board, Terrebonne Parish residents pumped nearly \$135 million into the 982 video-poker machines available in that parish. Lafourche residents spent more than \$99 million in 887 machines.

"Any time you have availability, accessibility and acceptability of a particular gaming entity in a particular area, you'll have more people gambling," Middleton said. "The more people gamble, the more they get into trouble."

Data provided by the Louisiana Association on Compulsive Gambling shows that, over the past six years, 314 Terrebonne and 161 Lafourche residents called the state's gambling-help line.

The majority of those problems dealt with video poker.

## 'PRISON, INSANITY OR DEATH'

Lin, 60, of a Raceland resident, recently returned from her second stay at the state's free inpatient treatment plan for compulsive gambling, Center of Recovery in Shreveport.

It's been three months since she's last gambled.

Lin, who asked that The Courier not divulge her last name, started gambling years ago after her children grew up and left the house.

It was something she and her husband did once a month, traveling to a casino in Mississippi to play. When riverboat gambling came to New Orleans, they'd play there, too.

"He was retired and I had been a housewife," she said. "It was just fun."

After her first husband died, Lin said she began a "roller-coaster" relationship with a man who was against gambling. She would go to the casinos just to escape him.

Video poker made its appearance about that time, and she began playing those machines, too.

Lin's gambling spiraled out of control, and the money she lost resulted in serious consequences.

She eventually had to sell the family home because she couldn't keep up with the mortgage. Lin entered the state's inpatient treatment program to confront her problem.

There she met women who had embezzled money to fuel their gambling addictions and were facing significant jail time.

"I've come to realize that it's prison, insanity or death. That's where your life is going to end up if you keep gambling," Lin said.

## **THE PROBLEM**

Gambling addiction is officially recognized as an impulse-control disorder by psychiatrists. Compulsive gamblers face an uncontrollable impulse to gamble that interferes with their relationships, destroys their finances and sometimes results in criminal behavior.

Social gamblers "only think about it when it's social or recreational time," said Janet Miller, program director of Center of Recovery in Shreveport.

Compulsive gamblers think about gambling "when they're working, when they're out with family and friends. When they go to gamble, they're not always doing it with friends. A lot of the time they go alone, and would prefer to do that."

They gamble with increasing amounts of money, often resulting in financial problems. They will gamble more often and in more places, and they begin to withdraw from others.

Because compulsive gamblers tend to cut themselves off, gambling has been called an invisible addiction. Family members and friends might not know there's a problem until the person is in severe financial or personal distress, Miller said.

“Folks who have gambling problems don’t particularly want to deal with their gambling problem until it becomes a real serious issue,” Middleton said.

## **THERE IS HELP**

Louisiana offers some of the best treatment options in the country for gambling addiction, and it’s free to residents who need it. That’s because gambling revenue pays for it, Middleton said.

The state’s Problem and Compulsive Gambling Fund gets a percentage of gambling income made by river-boat casinos, the state lottery, video-poker machines, race-track bets and Harrah’s land-based casino. That money is used by the state Office of Behavioral Health to provide free outpatient and counseling services in local communities across the state.

A toll-free state hotline 1-877-770-STOP, can refer patients to local treatment programs designed for specific issues.

If a person isn’t able to maintain local treatment and needs more help, they can be referred to the state’s inpatient program. The center is free to Louisiana residents.

Patients stay there for 36 days to disconnect from their environment and focus on recovery through counseling, lessons and meetings.

For help locally, you can call state addictive-disorders clinics. The number in Houma is 857-3615. The Thibodaux number is 447-0851.

There are also local Gamblers Anonymous groups.

In Thibodaux, the group meets at 5:15 p.m. Thursdays at the Addictive Disorders Clinic, 303 Hickory St. There’s also a meeting for family members of compulsive gamblers. That group meets at 6 p.m. Wednesdays at the Thibodaux Library, 705 W. 5th St.

The Thibodaux meetings are run by Glynn, 65, a local who’s been a recovered gambling addict for 10 years.

The meetings typically attract eight to 15 people, and members provide support, share their feelings and frustrations and help fellow members reach their recovery goals.

“Call us, and ask for help,” Glynn said.

## **RELIEF IN RECOVERY**

Mary Foret, 59, of Thibodaux, said that gambling was always present in her family. Like many Cajuns, they got together to play bingo, pedro and other card games for change.

The gambling escalated, she said, as her children grew. She quit nearly seven years ago.

“At first it was fun,” she said of her gambling habit. “But by the time it ended, I had to be there. And I wasn’t having any fun. I lost my paychecks and my self respect.”

She knew she needed to quit, but she said was too ashamed to even tell her husband. Instead she wrote him a letter.

She eventually had to declare bankruptcy because of her gambling losses, she said.

Joining the Gamblers Anonymous meetings in Thibodaux helped her quit for good.

She said she worries about others who might fall prey to the same addiction she did.

“I hope and pray that I never go back,” Foret said. “The hiding and the lying and the stress of it. Running home to cook and just putting slop in the pot. You’d try to cover the smell of smoke in your clothes, but you knew you weren’t hiding it. People knew.”

Being in recovery is “wonderful,” Lin said. She spends more time with her family, enjoying activities like weekends at the lake with her grandchildren.

“I’m sleeping better,” she said. “Before I would have to take something to knock me out. It’s a whole different way of life.”

Her advice to anyone who thinks they might need help is to reach out, whether in the early or late stages of gambling addiction.

“You think it’s fun, and it was fun at first. But when you can’t pay your bills the fun ends. It’s depression,” Lin said. “I tried to blame it on loneliness — on losing a loved one. But I look back, and I realize I’ve got so much more to live for.”

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