

Hitting Rock Bottom: Ohio County Leads State in Calls To Gambling Hotline

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WHEELING - Since the Problem Gamblers Help Network of West Virginia began operating about 10 years ago, one of every 87 Ohio County residents has called the 24-hour hotline seeking help for themselves or a loved one - the highest rate in the state, figures released by the network reveal.

And with two full-scale casinos within an hour's drive of each other and some of the highest rates of limited video lottery machines per capita in the state, the Northern Panhandle's counties claim four of West Virginia's 10 highest rates of calls per residents over that 10-year span: Hancock County is second, with one call for every 107 residents; Brooke County is fifth, with one for every 156 residents; and Marshall County seventh, with one for every 171.

Kanawha (one in 139) and Wood (one in 144) were the only non-Panhandle counties to crack the top five. The statewide rate is one call to the network for every 208 residents.

Wetzel County came in below that average, with one call for every 267 residents, while Tyler County shows the state's third-lowest rate with one call in 921 residents. These figures are averages based on total calls over the past decade, which could include individuals seeking help multiple times during that span.

The hotline's 10-year summary further notes that of its 8,889 intake calls from its inception through June 30, 2010, about 30 percent reported they or their loved one had committed some type of crime to finance their gambling addiction. And despite the introduction of table gambling at four state casinos over the last three and a half years, more than two-thirds of callers continue to report LVL machines at neighborhood bars and clubs as the primary source of their gambling losses.

Those statistics, however, likely tell only a chapter of the full story. Steve Burton, program director for the network, said despite persistent efforts to educate the public, fewer than 10 percent of gambling addicts ever reach out for help.

The Face of Addiction

"When you look at gambling addiction, you're looking at two very different types of people - escape gamblers, and action-seeking gamblers," said Burton, also the chief executive officer of First Choice Health System, which operates the hotline.

About 63 percent of callers reported using gambling as an escape from the problems of daily life or from feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety or depression.

"An escape gambler is far more likely to be female, far more likely to take part in games of chance," Burton noted. "These folks are usually gambling because they have other issues going on in life. ...Gambling just offers them a very powerful escape. That's our primary caller, right there."

Women accounted for 56 percent of calls to the hotline last fiscal year, consistent with the 10-year overall figure of about 53 percent. Other demographic data show the typical caller is married, 36-55 years of age, a high school graduate with full-time employment and an annual household income of more than \$50,000. Fewer than 15 percent of callers reported having a college degree.

Of the 7,475 callers over the past 10 years who reported some amount of gambling debt, about 35 percent reported owing \$1,000 to \$25,000. Fifteen percent said they owed \$500,000 or more.

According to the help network, 10 common symptoms of problem gamblers include:

- seeking financial bailouts;
- "chasing," or continuing to gamble in order to recoup one's losses;
- a preoccupation with reliving past gambling experiences;
- a loss of control;
- lying to conceal gambling;
- "tolerance," or needing to progressively increase the stakes in order to achieve the desired effect;
- escape;
- jeopardizing a significant relationship, job or educational opportunity;
- withdrawal;
- and illegal acts.

The three most commonly reported of those symptoms are loss of control, lying and chasing.

Impact of Table Gambling

Table gambling has brought an additional \$81.8 million in tax revenue to West Virginia's coffers since the first cards were dealt at Mountaineer Casino, Racetrack and Resort's poker room on Oct. 19, 2007. Wheeling Island Hotel-Casino-Racetrack followed suit just days later; the Mardi Gras Casino and Resort in Cross Lanes, W.Va., added table games in 2008 and the Hollywood Casino at Charles Town Races in the Eastern Panhandle was the last to do so, just last year.

Some feared the promise of added revenue with the expansion of legal gambling in West Virginia would be offset by increases in addiction and, as a result, criminal activity.

Burton said the hotline's statistics don't necessarily confirm those fears, but that doesn't mean table gambling hasn't taken its toll by drawing in the "action-seeking" gambler.

"What our data demonstrates is that folks are far more likely to call if they're escape gamblers," he said.

According to Burton, an action-seeking gambler most often is male, narcissistic and more likely to take part in games of skill - poker and sports betting, for example.

"Because of their narcissism - and generally they are intelligent people, very successful in whatever they do in their life - they believe they're too smart to become addicted," he said. "It gets in the way of seeking help."

These people, Burton said, often see it as little more than a bad run of luck as their gambling losses pile up.

Accessibility is another reason why LVL machines continue to be the primary source of gambling losses for callers, Burton said. While those living in the southeastern part of the state may be reluctant to drive multiple hours to a full-scale casino, every one of West Virginia's 55 counties offers limited video lottery.

Getting Help

Burton said problem gambling often is referred to as the "silent addiction" - one major challenge in identifying gambling addicts, which sets them apart from drug and alcohol abusers.

With drugs and alcohol "you can see it, you can smell it on their breath, you can see it in their eyes," he said. "Gambling does not have those physical symptoms."

That's a big reason more than one-third of the network's \$1.48 million in expenses during fiscal 2010 were for outreach and advertising. The network's budget represents about one-tenth of one percent of the approximately \$1.358 billion West Virginia pulled in from gambling during the fiscal year.

Even with the advertising effort, Burton said the network still encounters much reluctance to seek help on the part of problem gamblers.

"There's a great amount of stigma that goes along with seeking help. ... Gambling addiction's just like any other issue," said Burton. "If you don't go to an expert that's going to get you the help you need, you're not going to get any better."

The hotline, reached by calling 1-800-426-2537, is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Burton said about 80 percent of callers are the gamblers themselves, while the remaining 20 percent of calls come from concerned loved ones.

When someone calls the helpline, a counselor will listen to the caller's story and ask if the person is suicidal or otherwise in imminent danger. After making sure the caller is safe, the helpline counselor will schedule a face-to-face appointment with a counselor in the caller's local area. Counselors also will make follow-up calls before and after the initial appointment, unless the gambler requests that those calls stop.

In all cases, the helpline will pay for the initial face-to-face counseling session. Beyond that, an individual's insurance company would take over, though Burton said there's funding available to continue helping the uninsured or those with a high deductible.

Burton said he believes the gambling industry by and large is doing its part to combat addiction, pointing out state law required the helpline's number to be displayed on every LVL machine.

"I think the gaming industry's out in front of things. We're funded 100 percent by lottery revenues, and that's the way it is around the nation," he said. "I think the industry's reached out and made sure we've had funding available."