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Online Gambling Broke UConn Poker Addict — Now We Want To Make It Legal?

'I Hope The Legislators Are Prepared For The World They Are Opening Up'

By Rick Green

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Joe Turbessi couldn't put his laptop down, let alone stop the poker-playing.

So he'd go for hours at a time, hand after hand, wandering around his apartment, emptying his bank account while missing classes, friends, food and sleep as he gambled his way through the [University of Connecticut](#).

"The only thing that ran through my mind was the next poker hand," Turbessi explained to students in a health class at Housatonic Valley Regional High School in Canaan one day this week, warning them about the danger of gambling and addiction. Turbessi, a 2002 Housatonic graduate, has been making his case against poker for the past few years, writing a book and speaking to college and high school students about his misfortune.

"Poker had my attention and I didn't have time to do anything else," Turbessi told the small health class. "It was so easy. I couldn't miss a hand. If I didn't have the computer on, I could miss my lucky break."

For reasons explained only by greed or stupidity, dozens of states are lining up to make money off sad cases of people like Turbessi, who up to now have been patronizing off-shore online gambling websites. The rush began after the Justice Department ruled last month that the federal Wire Act of 1961 does not ban non-sports gambling over the Internet, reversing years of federal opposition.

Now, as Connecticut begins debating legalizing online gambling — and Gov. [Dannel P. Malloy](#) has signaled he's more than ready to consider it — Turbessi's message has taken on new urgency.

Highly addictive and solitary, Internet gambling is suddenly the new money spigot for governments that can't stop spending. Malloy and other Democratic leaders, who frequently tell us about the importance of funding all-day kindergarten and new programs for poor children, appear eager to stick it to the unfortunate to raise more government revenue.

The astonishing justification is that everyone else is going to be doing it, so we had better get on the bandwagon.

How's that for a perverted message to our young people? How about saying no to something that state government should not be foisting upon its citizens anyway?

"What everyone needs to be aware of here is that this is a government program based on pushing people deeper and deeper into personal debt and creating addiction in order to feed off of it," said Les Bernal, executive director of Stop Predatory Gambling, a [Washington, D.C.](#)-based advocacy group that opposes government-sponsored gambling.

"This is the equivalent of opening up a casino or lottery retailer in every home, office or dorm room in Connecticut, 24 hours a day, seven days a week."

For Connecticut, it's "an economic issue," said Roy Occhiogrosso, a top Malloy aide. "We have to be mindful of what other states are doing. We are competing for jobs. What [the governor] is trying to do is find a middle ground."

We are far from middle ground here. Already our culture is overwhelmed with gambling, from slots to table games to poker to the false promises peddled by the government-run state lottery.

Adding more gambling because government needs more money to spend — or because we are surrounded by sucker gambling in other states — seems like a flimsy argument for something that will bring more pain, suffering and financial ruin to Connecticut residents. This is not what good government is about, whether it's Democrat or Republican.

"It's more dangerous than any other form of gambling outside of slot machines," said Sam Skolnik, author of the newly published book "High Stakes: The Rising Cost of America's Gambling [Addiction](#)." "The types of gamblers who are drawn to Internet gambling are younger gamblers who are more prone to [gambling addiction](#)."

Turbessi was a high school quarterback who wanted to be an actuary. He tells audiences that he wanted to find quick success without working hard. Researchers say that thrill-seeking, college-age males are the perfect mark for the predatory online gambling industry. A UConn study of a few years ago found that online players are more likely to develop gambling problems.

The lucky break Turbessi chased around the clock never arrived. At UConn, he pursued poker from online to the Indian casinos, where he perfected his addiction and continued unabated until late 2009 when he quit cold turkey and wrote a self-published book about his experience, "Into the Muck."

The muck is gone, but the stain remains. Turbessi hopes students — and maybe politicians — pay attention to his experience.

"It overwhelmed me. It broke me down," he said. "I hope the legislators are prepared for the world they are opening up."