

Illinois' split-screen reality on gambling

By Melynda Litchfield

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After walking just 20 feet into the casino with a friend, I excused myself and vomited. The smells, sounds and sights of the casino came flooding back. Exhilaration, hope, hours lost in the “zone,” then — as always — defeat and despair.

In July of 2002, the Illinois Gaming Board launched a statewide voluntary self-exclusion program that allows people who have determined they are problem gamblers to exclude themselves from all Illinois casinos. On the strong urging of my Gamblers Anonymous sponsor, that was my mission that day.

I spotted the nearest security guard, who ironically was the one who welcomed me to the casino daily. “I need to place myself on the self-exclusion list,” I said flatly.

When I self-excluded myself in 2012, I joined the ranks of nearly 10,000 citizens in Illinois who admitted they are addicted to government-sponsored casinos.

The security guard spoke into a collar radio and handed me off to a gentleman in a suit who escorted me to an office. The higher-up in charge of this eternal execution of my gambling rights was professional and soft-spoken, as if he was breaking the news to me about a terminal medical condition.

I had my picture taken and filled out the paperwork. YES: I acknowledge I am a problem gambler and that I am unable to gamble responsibly. YES: I acknowledge that placement on the self-exclusion list is permanent. YES: I understand that if I fail to honor this agreement and I am discovered on the premises of a casino, I will be removed from the gaming area, surrender any winnings, and be arrested and charged with trespassing.

In the end, I walked out with a lighter step and the knowledge that the biggest bait and allure for my addiction was out of reach. I had, by placing myself on the self-exclusion list, guaranteed that I could never, ever gamble in an Illinois gaming establishment for the remainder of my life. This was to be my safety net, my armor shield. I was now liberated from the very establishments that brought me down, desecrated and ruined my life.

I shut that door and battened down the hatches, from here on out an illegal interloper.

But hold on. Two years later not only is that door not shut, it's open wider than ever. That safety net is now a porous mesh, riddled with holes and breaches not only allowing me, but beckoning me and thousands of others, to fail. For every land- or water-based Illinois casino I am prohibited from stepping foot in (even in the parking lot), I can now saunter in unencumbered to hundreds of bars, restaurants, truck stops and even assisted-living facilities while visiting Aunt Agnes, and gamble all day long. The best ones, obviously predatory toward women, are the "casino cafes," veiled in darling names like Stella's or Dolly's. Come on in and have a tuna sandwich and an iced tea, then partake in some video poker in the back room.

Illinois, we have a problem. Self-exclusion list? What self-exclusion list? Self-exclusion list be damned. Thousands of suffering citizens of Illinois have made the difficult decision to place themselves on the list, a decision not undertaken with casual indifference.

But what is an addicted gambler to do now? This is not to say we do not have culpability in staying the course and remaining sober. However, is it not a very flawed juxtaposition for Illinois legislators and Illinois Gaming Board officials, charged with protecting the public, to allow a plethora of other gaming establishments to run willy-nilly without even the pretense of mandating some sort of process or extension of the established self-exclusion list?

I strongly urge our elected officials as well as the Illinois Gaming Board to swiftly address this glaring proliferation of venues.

The first step is acknowledging that you have a problem, Illinois. If this issue is not addressed it will profoundly undermine the original purpose of the gaming board's self-exclusion list.

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