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EDITORIAL

Hooked by design

Internet cafés fostered gambling addiction in Ohio's communities

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The Ohio Senate this summer gambled with the lives of some of the state's most-vulnerable residents — and all Ohioans lost.

This is obvious from a story in Monday's *Dispatch* reporting that nearly two-thirds of those being treated at Maryhaven, a Columbus addiction-treatment center, for gambling addiction blame Internet sweepstakes cafés for getting them hooked.

The cafés — banned by the General Assembly in May, but granted a chance to survive by referendum — are a convenient temptation.

“They are ubiquitous,” said Paul Coleman, president and chief executive officer of Maryhaven. “You don't have to drive across town or out of town to a casino.”

In fact, there's one right by Maryhaven.

The cost to taxpayers is sizable. The cafés tie up law enforcement. They siphon dollars from legitimate charitable gaming. They prey on the poor. And unlike the casinos or state lottery, which share proceeds with schools or local governments, Internet cafés benefit only their operators. They are a drain on society.

Maryhaven added gambling to its treatment center three years ago, using a modest \$25,000 grant from the Columbus Foundation. It expects to expand to a new location, using \$278,000 from casino-tax proceeds.

Internet-café gambling has become such a problem that it's now recognized in the same category as drug and alcohol addiction by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, consulted by medical and treatment professionals.

Café betting gets its claws into people's brains. “It just appears the way the machines are set up, it's getting ready to hit,” said a Whitehall woman undergoing treatment at Maryhaven. “That's what keeps you playing. But it's a rip-off.”

The working mother, 56, figures she lost \$200 to \$300 a week gambling in the cafés.

Patrons buy phone cards or Internet time, which come with sweepstakes credits that can be played on café terminals with computer games that look like slots, poker and other casino games. The bigger the purchase, the more credits one gets to play.

Ohio lawmakers were told this spring by top law-enforcement officials that the cafés often are fronts for illegal gambling, organized crime and money-laundering. The Senate should have closed them down immediately by passing the House bill as emergency legislation. Laws necessary to protect the public peace, health or safety do not require a 90-day waiting period to take effect; better yet, they aren't subject to a referendum vote.

But the Senate — having previously sat on the legislation for reasons that seemed fishy — passed up that opportunity. While the Ohio House speaker rounded up the votes to add the emergency clause, Senate President Keith Faber, R-Celina, couldn't get widespread support in his chamber.

Now the sweepstakes-café industry is gathering 231,000 signatures for the November 2014 ballot, meaning the new law wouldn't take effect until voters weigh in. Some ban.

Meanwhile, the more than 500 Internet sweepstakes cafés around the state likely will remain open during a long, well-financed fight.

And, as the extremely disturbing report from Maryhaven indicates, Ohioans will continue to struggle.