



SugarHouse Casino takes losers to court

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SugarHouse Casino in Philadelphia has gone to court in a bid to recoup more than \$520,000 from 63 gamblers who have failed to repay markers - casino loans - issued in the last four years.

The action offers a peek into the opaque world of casino credit, an unusual form of commerce in that the money that is lent usually goes right back to the lender in the form of gambling losses. That makes it a transaction fundamentally different than a retailer selling a sofa on credit.

"There's an incentive for liberal lending because the odds are that the money is not leaving the building," said Paul Boni, a lawyer in Philadelphia and a board member of Stop Predatory Gambling, a national advocacy group.

Four-fifths of the cases - those involving \$12,000 or less - are in Small Claims Court in Philadelphia, with initial hearings scheduled for Tuesday at 10 a.m. The larger claims, including one for \$90,000 and five between \$20,000 and \$30,000, were filed in Common Pleas Court.

SugarHouse said these claims represented less than 1 percent of markers issued since the casino opened in Fishtown in 2010. Since opening, SugarHouse has won \$973 million from gamblers.

"Issuing credit responsibly is a top priority for SugarHouse," casino spokesman Jack Horner said.

The claims, spotted by officials of Unite Here, a labor union that has been trying to organize workers at SugarHouse, were filed on two days in July. The 49 Small Claims Court cases were filed on July 22, and the remaining cases were filed in Common Pleas Court on July 15.

In most cases, the gamblers had just one marker outstanding, but in one case there were nine.

The time stamps on those documents included in the filings provide evidence of what must have been frantic, desperate episodes of bad luck that had to turn, except that it didn't.

For example, on Oct. 10, 2012, a gambler borrowed \$500 at 4:45 a.m., \$2,000 at 5:55 a.m., and \$1,000 at 7:47 a.m., to land very quickly \$3,500 in debt in about three hours.

The individual facing a \$90,000 claim borrowed \$30,000 at 12:16 a.m. on Feb. 2, 2013. About six hours later, the person borrowed \$50,000. The remainder of the claim came about a week later.

State regulations have a light touch when it comes to lending, Boni said.

"They have some procedural safeguards from the casino's point of view," he said, "but it still has no substantive standards or substantive guidelines on whether you can lend five grand or 30 grand or 100 grand."