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State criticized for approach to problem gambling

By David Blanchette, Correspondent

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While it's all dollars and cents for the Illinois General Assembly as it considers more casinos, and for the city of Springfield, which leads the state in video gambling licenses, there's a human toll that's being paid, critics say.

There is a lack of responsible gambling and consumer protection, said Keith Whyte, executive director of the National Council on Problem Gambling. He calls Illinois' video gambling law "possibly the worst model for legalized gambling in the country right now."

"This distributed network, where you are putting machines in bars and taverns without training for staff, with alcohol a leading co-addiction, I honestly don't think you could figure out a worse way to offer gambling," he said.

Don Tracy of Springfield, chairman of the five-member Illinois Gaming Board, which regulates and collects taxes from riverboat casinos and video gambling establishments, defends Illinois' approach. He agrees that the state's newest form of gambling is not without its problems. But he said the gaming board is working diligently to find solutions.

"We do recognize problem gambling as a serious issue," Tracy said. "On the riverboat side, we have a self-exclusion process, and we have about 11,000 people on that list, so if they get caught on a riverboat, they could get fined and the chips they have are forfeited. Employees are actually paid a bonus if they catch someone on the self-exclusion list on the boat. It has a definite deterrent effect."

However, there's no such exclusion list for storefront video gambling.

"We are actively researching a way to apply that same self-exclusion approach to video gaming. It's a priority," Tracy said. "But we are having difficulty finding a good model. ... With 21,000 terminals out there, spread among about 5,000 locations, it's a real challenge.

"With 10 riverboats, you have fixed locations and fixed boundaries. It's a lot easier to develop and enforce a self-exclusion rule. On the video gaming side, the 21,000 locations are like the equivalent of 17 riverboats but in 5,000 different locations all over the state."

No hard figures

"There is an increase in the people who come to meetings who got addicted to the video gaming at these quaint little establishments," Olsen said.

Whyte said Illinois should know the extent of the problem but apparently doesn't want to.

"It does not seem like Illinois has any interest whatsoever in doing any survey research," Whyte said. "We don't know how to measure the problem because calls to a help line are not an accurate barometer of problem gambling. The state should be able to measure that, but they're not."

Others see such concerns as overblown.

"Predictions of major social costs associated with video gambling have simply not materialized. Social service agencies have not seen a major influx of clients due to video gambling," said Michael Gelatka, president of the **Illinois Gaming Machine Operators Association**. "Press accounts show police chiefs report no noticeable increase in crime. Businesses adjacent to video gaming establishments have been positive about their neighbors, often crediting them with helping to revive the area."

Another criticism of video gambling is what some perceive as a deliberate attempt to target women as players. Anita Bedell, executive director of the Springfield-based **Illinois Church Action on Alcohol and Addiction Problems**, is convinced of that.

"They have names like Lucy's, Emma's, Stella's, Penny's; they're all women's names," Bedell said. "So that's their target, and they know that this form of gambling is very addictive for women."

Melynda Litchfield, a self-described gambling addict, has experienced the attraction firsthand.

"They have these cutesy little homey names like Stella's and Betty's, and what does that tell you? That they prey on the most vulnerable — the women, minorities, and the fastest-growing group of problem gamblers: senior citizens," she said. "It's creating addicts at exponential rates."

Gamblers 'high'

Litchfield remembers the "high" she used to get when she was on her way to gamble.

"You get this high, not when you sit down at a machine but when you have the money in your pocket and you know you're going. And you're excited about the possibility of getting into that zone for hours at a time," Litchfield said. "And then you start gambling, and in a very short period of time, that thrill or high that you had becomes anguish oftentimes, even if you win, because you know you're going to end up putting it all back anyway."

Litchfield, from St. Charles, is the national victims advocate for **Stop Predatory Gambling**, an organization based in Washington. She is also a problem gambler who sought help in 2012 for her addiction and hasn't gambled since. But she said it hasn't been easy.

Taking a measurement of problem gambling at video terminals is difficult at best since many of the treatment and support mechanisms that exist are either anonymous, treat all forms of addictive behavior, or don't differentiate among types of gambling.

The Illinois Institute for Addiction Recovery in Springfield reports no noticeable increase in the number of people requesting treatment for problem gambling since the video gambling law took effect. Gamblers Anonymous groups, including two that meet regularly in Springfield, do not readily share statistical information, and their meetings are closed to all except problem gamblers.

Robert Olsen is president of the Outreach Foundation for Problem and Compulsive Gamblers, headquartered in Downers Grove. The organization hosts three Gamblers Anonymous meetings at its office, and Olsen, a recovering compulsive gambler for the past 25 years, attends several of the meetings.

"I would work the p.m. shift at the hospital, from 3 to midnight, and I would say, 'OK, I'm going to go to the casino for an hour and unwind and go home.' And I would watch the sun come up and be ushered out by security guards because the casino was closing," Litchfield recalled. "You're so entrenched in the habit of going whenever you can.

"I used gambling as an escape. You combine that with the fact that they built a casino 10 minutes from my house, and it was within a fairly short period of time that it became a problem."

Easy access is becoming more of an issue for gambling addicts in Illinois.

"I stopped gambling right before these video gambling terminals began popping up all over the place in Illinois. I feel very confident in my recovery, but it certainly is tempting. They are on nearly every street corner and in bars and Laundromats and restaurants," Litchfield said. "I see people in my current role every single day who have lost years of work and sobriety just by walking into a gas station or another seemingly innocuous place and encountering a video gambling machine."

Bedell noted: "They already had 11,000 people who said that their gambling was so out of control that they asked to be banned at the casinos. This was before video gambling was so extensive."

Litchfield is among the problem gamblers who have chosen to put themselves on Illinois' riverboat casino exclusion list.

"There are 10 riverboat casinos that I can't go into without the threat of being arrested for trespassing or having to hand over my winnings," she said. "But there are 5,000 other places that I can go into anytime I want and gamble all day long."

Social costs

The Video Gaming Act requires that 25 percent of each terminal's \$100 annual state licensing fee go to gambling addiction services. Gelatka, of the Illinois Gaming Machine Operators Association, said some municipalities also put a portion of their gambling revenue toward addiction treatment, and he said the association sought and helped pass legislation that requires training for employees in video gambling establishments to spot and help patrons in need.

"The great majority of players understand that video gaming is an option for their entertainment budget and plan accordingly," Gelatka said. "For the rare player who loses control, the video gaming industry and the Illinois Gaming Board have made battling problem gambling an upfront priority."

Gelatka added that the association is a founding member of the Illinois Alliance on Problem Gambling, which is composed of social service providers, industry representatives and others who share a common interest in providing education about the risks of problem gambling, preventing underage play, and coordinating resources to aid problem gamblers, their families and the public.

But state and industry efforts to combat problem gambling at video gambling establishments aren't enough for some critics.

"It requires a staged, responsive public health campaign using the equivalent of 1 percent of all gambling revenue in Illinois," said Whyte, of the National Council on Problem Gambling. "Not just a sign that says, 'If you have a problem, call this number.' "

Whyte estimates the social cost of gambling addiction in the United States at "more than \$7 billion per year in criminal justice and health care costs."

"This is something that can destroy not only the person's life but the lives of their family, their friends, their business," he said.

Although 25 percent of net revenue from video gambling goes to the state and 5 percent goes to local government, "it doesn't even begin to pay for the social cost," Bedell said.

"The social cost of one pathological gambler is over \$13,000 a year, every year. ... It takes a while for the social costs to come to light, with addiction, bankruptcy, crime, suicides," she said.

Litchfield has numbers of her own to offer.

"Study after study finds that for every \$1 made through gambling revenues, there are \$3 in social costs," Litchfield said. "People have to lose a million dollars for a municipality to make \$50,000. There's got to be another way.

"I don't have an answer where that money would come from otherwise, but it can't be on the backs of everyday, vulnerable citizens. No civilized government supports itself by creating insurmountable debt, misery and anguish among its citizens. The state is addicted to gambling itself."

Bedell suggests that at the very least, the gaming board should place a moratorium on any new video gambling machines in Illinois.

But Litchfield said the machines that already exist can do more than enough damage.

"Nobody drove my car to the casino; nobody withdrew my money out of the ATM; nobody put that money in the machine. However, there is no doubt in my mind that Illinois government was complicit in not putting any safety nets in place for me," Litchfield said. "I make the analogy that I can walk into a bar and have eight drinks, and they would cut me off because I'm impaired and I might go and hurt somebody. But with video gambling, you'd think they would say, 'Maybe we should see if she needs some help.' That is not happening."

Gamblers Anonymous

Springfield Gamblers Anonymous meetings are held at 6:30 p.m. Wednesdays at First United Methodist Church, 2941 S. Koke Mill Road, and at 7 p.m. Sundays at Discovery Club, 313 W. Cook St.

Both are closed meetings, which means only those with gambling problems, not family members or others, may attend.

Number of video gaming establishments in selected area communities

Community, Establishments , Video Gaming Terminals

Auburn, 7, 23

Buffalo, 1, 3

Carlinville, 8, 35

Chatham, 5, 25

Dawson, 2, 6

Decatur, 52, 245

Divernon, 2, 9

Girard, 1, 5

Grandview, 1, 5

Greenview, 2, 8

Hillsboro, 4, 13

Illiopolis, 1, 5

Jacksonville, 24, 105

Jerome, 5, 25

Lincoln, 13, 61

Litchfield, 10, 44

Morrisonville, 2, 8

New Berlin, 2, 10

Pana, 10, 40

Pawnee, 3, 13

Petersburg, 3, 13

Pleasant Plains, 2, 7

Sangamon County (unincorporated), 34, 153

South Jacksonville, 3, 13

Southern View, 4, 20

Spaulding, 1, 5

Springfield, 126, 542

Virden, 5, 18

Virginia, 4, 15

Waverly, 4, 15

Winchester, 3, 10

Source: Illinois Gaming Board

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