

Testimony of Craig Johnson
Informational hearing on economic, health and social harms resulting from online sports
gambling
State Senate Finance Committee
January 8, 2025

Members of the Committee,

Gambling, no matter the form or venue, affects individuals who experience significant impaired control over their gambling and negative consequences for their health, finances, family and friends, or school and work because of their impaired control. These individuals exhibit several behaviors that put them at risk for problem gambling, such as gambling more than they intended, chasing their losses, or attempting and failing to cut down on gambling activity. These behaviors also trigger profound changes in the individual's neurocognitive ability to make decisions over a long period of time, even after one has stopped gambling and is faced with these consequences.

Gambling Disorder is the uncontrollable urge to keep gambling despite the toll it takes on your life. Gambling means that you're willing to risk something you value in the hope of getting something of even greater value. Moreover, Gambling Disorder can stimulate the brain's reward system much like drugs or alcohol can, leading to chronic addiction. Some of the behaviors associated with this disorder manifest in one's continually chase bets that lead to more losses, hiding one's behavior, deplete savings, accumulating debt, or even resort to theft or fraud to support the addiction.

Gambling Disorder is a serious condition that can destroy lives. Although treating compulsive gambling can be challenging, many people who struggle with compulsive gambling have found help in prolonged and consistent professional treatment. While support groups such as Gamblers Anonymous are helpful, such groups do not really get to the underlying causes of why an individual used gambling as a coping mechanism. The profound psychological effects of Gambling Disorder in the population of people affected show a 5-10 times higher likelihood of suicidal thoughts or committing the act of suicide. Research shows women are at a much greater risk of experiencing severe depression and contemplating and/or attempting suicide. More specifically, among women with this disorder, 45% indicated having persistent suicidal ideation and 29% have attempted suicide.

As the members are all aware, sports wagering has been an "underground" activity for decades. However, since the decision to allow this to be a legal activity in 2018, it has been an increasingly problematic area that needs to be addressed in the clinical setting. In my personal practice over the last 12 months, I have seen a 25% increase in clients stating that sports wagering was their primary gambling choice, and all have experienced some level of the consequences described above. It is also important to remember that sports wagering is not always isolated and that many individuals increase or engage in many other forms of gambling. The damage from gambling (sports wagering, on-line and casinos) is there and it is growing. It has not and will not abate. This body must ensure that adequate funds are allotted to address not only awareness and prevention, but foremost, treatment of our citizens and their families affected by the chronic condition that is Gambling Disorder.

Very respectfully,

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