

## **Testimony of Kylie Larson**

Informational hearing on economic, health and social harms resulting from online sports gambling

*State Senate Finance Committee*

January 8, 2025

A gambling disorder is a condition in which gambling becomes an addiction and interferes with a person's daily life. Hi, my name is Kylie Larson, I am 32 years old, and I am a compulsive gambler. I am writing this written statement to inform you about my story – and how gambling has destroyed my life. For the past 8 years, I have been powerless over my gambling. I knew I had a problem, but I did not admit I was an addict until September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2024, when I checked myself into a 30-day intense inpatient treatment program. While addiction is not a choice, recovery is. On January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2025, I will be celebrating 6 months of living a gambling free life.

I face complications because of gambling. I am struggling with relationship and financial problems, legal and imprisonment and deteriorating mental health. Compulsive gambling is a serious condition that can destroy lives, like mine.

Addiction is an isolating disease. If you are anything like me, you do not even want to consider the words associated with it. I avoided “addict” and “compulsive gambler” for years. They sounded bad. I felt like if I admitted, my life would be over. I did not want to admit defeat. When I was arrested for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time, I knew my addiction won. I remember sitting in the jail cell – wanting to kill myself. “I am an addict” are the toughest words I have said in my lifetime. Addiction is powerful... so many lies, deceit, desperate actions, and extremely poor choice making. Gambling became my best friend – my addiction mattered most and was #1. I did not care about family, friends or my now 8-year-old daughter. I did not even care about my wellbeing or future. To be honest, nothing mattered. I was selfish, Kylie. I have stolen sentimental items from my parents – like wedding rings and tools. I have stolen from my daughter's piggy bank – and have taken money that she has gotten from Holidays and her birthdays. My parents had to use my daughter's college savings to bail me out of jail. I have stolen from my friends and even their parents. I had my grandma take out extra school loans for me – these funds went all to gambling. I purposely had her co-sign on private school loans, so I would get the funds, directly. Admitting my problem to my family and friends has been very traumatic. There is so much guilt, shame, and denial. I was afraid of confrontation; I never had the courage or degree of bravery to admit my addiction and reveal the issue. I covered my troubles so well – and painted a different picture of myself.

No one knew, I gambled alone, always alone. At the start, I did not think there were troubles to cover until I became a gambling addict.

For me, the action of placing a bet and waiting for the outcome felt good. It relieved my depression, killed my emotional pain, and delivered a sense of wellbeing. I have struggled with domestic abuse with boyfriends over the years. I struggled with postpartum depression after being my daughter into this world. I did not know how to raise a child on my own, I was scared. I mean, gambling gave me something that nothing in this world could ever do. How can this be true? Gambling can stimulate the brain's reward system – like drugs or alcohol. I was constantly chasing bets that lead to losses, draining my savings, building debt, and even turned to theft and fraud to support my addiction. I am serious, it destroyed my life.

I am a felon; I will forever be a felon. I will never get to go on a family trip again. I will never own a home. I will never be able to volunteer at my daughter's school. I will never have a savings account. I could go to prison. I will be paying restitution for the rest of my life, and I will have to file bankruptcy. I took all these big risks to gamble. Just why...

During the pandemic, I found myself at the casino every day. Although I gambled for years prior, my gambling became worse. During lockdown, the casino was one of the very few places that remained open. This just goes to show the crazy world we live in. Why was everything else closed, but the casinos remained open? During this time in 2021, I was an Accounting Specialist for a senior living facility (remote position). I was not working from home; I was working from my phone at the casino. I was sitting in front of the machines, hitting those buttons, with my phone in my other hand. I started writing company checks to friends and family members I knew. I would make up lies – and get them to believe that they were my payroll checks. I took advantage of far too many people, including my elderly grandma. I did everything and anything to get more money to gamble. This was stolen money, money that was not mine, money that I did not earn. These were profoundly serious legal crimes I was committing. Absolutely not, I did not care – because I was active in my addiction. Eventually, I was fired from my employment – I stole 25,000.00. I got everything resolved in court with minimal consequences. I had to do community service, pay restitution, and check in with my probation officer. I was handed 5 years of probation. At this point, I knew I still had a problem that was overseen. I remember telling my probation officer that I had a severe problem. I got on medication to help the cravings and urges on my own. I went to orientation for an outpatient treatment program on my own. I struggled with childcare, so never completed the program. I never got the help I needed; I was not ready to admit that I had an issue. If one of my conditions of release – was to complete treatment, I would have done it at that time. I would not be in the troubles I am now.

After being fired, I started seeking new employment. I found employment as an Accounting Specialist at a storage facility. Within 2 months of employment, I was back to stealing to fuel my addiction – being powerless and so reckless. In 4 years, I stole \$600,000.00. Now, I am facing profoundly serious legal issues – and looking at 20+ years in prison. Again, I did not stop to think about the horrific crimes I was committing. I did whatever it took to get more money to gamble. Remember, a big win was never enough. I kept chasing, chasing and more chasing.

Gambling has destroyed me. Gambling has destroyed my family. Gambling has destroyed my employment. Gambling has destroyed my health. I am lucky to be alive. As of today, I have not gambled in 6 months – and will never place a bet again. I am finding my true authentic self, making up for lost time, focusing on my business, being present, taking care of my daughter and making healthy decisions. I know what gambling has done to me and what it can do to others. I am committed to my journey of recovery, and every step I take is a step towards a healthier me. I hope to continue to raise awareness and share my story.

With gratitude,

Kylie Larson