

FOREWORD

Testimony Purpose and Dedication

This testimony is prepared expressly for and is dedicated especially to those many thousands of persons in Louisiana whose lives have been or will be adversely affected by gambling problems.

Their names may be Antoine or Arceneaux; Washington or Wilson.....they may live in Lake Providence or Cocodrie....in one of our major metropolitan areas or, for that matter, Angola. They are people..... they are Louisianians 200,000 - 300,000 strong. It is for them this testimony is prepared and presented.

THE PROBLEM

In the 1995 regular session of the Louisiana Legislature, Senator Jay Dardenne introduced Senate Resolution # 149 which formed the Louisiana Compulsive Gambling Study Committee. Among other things, its charge was to study the problem of compulsive gambling.

Such a study was done by Dr. Rachel Volberg of Gemini Research, an eminent researcher in the field. The study showed that approximately 1.4% of those persons in Louisiana over the age of 21 have a gambling problem severe enough to be termed pathological gamblers. That is to say that they would probably meet the diagnostic criteria set down in the DSM-IV (312.31) known as pathological gambling, a disorder of impulse control. The study further showed that for persons ages 18-21 the percentage was a disturbing 3.1%.

Also indicated as having some level of problem with gambling, but not severe enough to qualify as “pathological”, there was an additional 3% of those persons over age 21 and, again at a disturbing level, 11.2% of those persons age 18-21.

The totals, then, reflect 4.4% of over 21 adults and 14.3% of 18-21 young adults with some level of gambling problem at the present time. As a percentage of the total population this calculates to slightly under 5%. The study further showed that at some point during their lifetime a total of 7% of our population would have some level of problem with gambling.

A study of 12,066 adolescents in grades 6-12 conducted by Drs. James Westphal, Lee Stevens and Jill Rush of LSU Medical School in Shreveport developed an even more disturbing level of over 16% of youth with some level of gambling problem.

Mister Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Commission, I am at once honored and humbled to be invited to testify before this august body..... and to be a part of this truly distinguished panel. I salute you and commend you for your dedication and I join you in your commitment to help the problem gambler and his/her family.

I want to welcome the commission and my fellow panelists to the "Country" that is Louisiana - we are just a little bit different and we truly hope you will stay for a bit and find that out for yourselves.

I am Reece Middleton, Executive Director of the Louisiana Association on Compulsive Gambling, the Louisiana Affiliate of the National Council on Problem Gambling, Inc. As an affiliate council of National we are neither pro legalized gambling nor anti-legalized gambling. Our position is one of neutrality. Our Mission Statement calls for us to advocate for all individuals in Louisiana who may be affected by gambling problems and to promote quality assistance for those persons wherever indicated.

I have been working with addictions treatment and management since 1980 and received my first call about gambling addiction in 1982, a significant date indeed and one about which I will say more later.

Video poker seems to be especially troublesome for a portion of our population. It appears to progress especially quickly and perhaps can be credited with being very high on all the components which make a gambling activity exciting and attractive to the average person but potentially addictive to the problem gambler.

Robert Hunter, PhD, of Las Vegas, Nevada identifies those as:

- 1) Immediacy
- 2) Ability to increase
- 3) Perception of skill
- 4) Ability to lose yourself

And I like to add an additional one which I refer to as the “two cherry syndrome” -

- 5) Intermittent rewards

It's our belief, then, that there is a sufficient degree of problem at various levels of our population to indicate some treatment interventions.

THE SOLUTION

A most fortuitous development for the problem gambler and his/her family took place in 1996. Mr. Alton E. "Jake" Hadley, with the encouragement and support of some of us who were serving on the Governor's Commission on Alcohol and Drug abuse at the time, was appointed to direct the State Office of Alcohol and Drug Abuse.

He came with energy, knowledge, commitment and a firm conviction that problem gambling is an addiction which should be addressed accordingly and properly belongs in the Office of Alcohol and Drug Abuse for treatment.

He began working diligently with then Secretary of Dept. of Health and Hospitals, Bobby Jindal, to develop and implement the Department's Compulsive and Problem Gambling Seven Point Action Plan. This work has continued uninterrupted under the current Secretary, Mr. David Hood. The plan has been previously provided to the Commissioners so I will not repeat it in detail but the highlights included increased enforcement of age restrictions, improvement of the Problem Gambling Helpline, raising the minimum age to 21 for all forms of gambling and the development of effective treatment approaches.

Using monies provided by gaming taxes the Office of Alcohol and Drug Abuse, under Mr. Hadley's leadership, installed outpatient treatment programs for problem gamblers throughout the state in all 10 regions of the Office of Alcohol and Drug Abuse.

With the help and assistance of interested and committed legislators such as Representative Charles Riddle and the support of others such as Representative Cedric Glover the amount of funding from gaming taxes available for treatment was increased by over 300%.

With the assistance of and some funding by the State Lottery, billboards promoting the Problem Gamblers Helpline were installed all over the state.

Representatives of the gaming industry and the Casino Association of Louisiana made major donations in order to provide training for their employees on compulsive gambling and underage gambling issues.

The development of a major pathological gambling prevention plan was begun by the Office of Alcohol and Drug Abuse in conjunction with Louisiana State University. This plan is scheduled for completion, announcement and implementation in October 1998 - next month.

A follow-up to the 1995 Volberg prevalence study will be initiated very soon in conjunction with the University of New Orleans.

And now the real coup..... Something that to my awareness no other state government is doing..... We will open in Northwest Louisiana a residential treatment center for compulsive gamblers unable to maintain abstinence in an outpatient setting prior to the end of this year!!!!!! This is a fact of which we are most proud!!!! How wonderful indeed it is to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem!!

We will utilize a proven combination of group and individual therapies, education, nutrition and involvement in the 12 step recovery process. This we believe to be the most effective method of addressing the problem.

RECOMMENDATION

It is our considered opinion, Ladies and Gentlemen, that other states could benefit from our experience and we respectfully suggest that the following actions steps be taken:

1) That a National Prevalence Study be undertaken to determine the severity of the problem and how it varies from region to region.

2) That consideration be given to the development of a National Pathological Gambling Prevention Plan.

3) That funding be provided for the Gamblers Helpline of the National Council on Problem Gambling. I serve on the Helpline Committee and am keenly aware of the financial need.

4) And, most importantly, that serious attention be given to funding treatment for problem gambling throughout the country.

For those who would say "It's not our problem - we don't have legalized gambling", I would offer three comments:

1) Remember when my first call for help came - 1982??? Long before Louisiana legalized riverboat casinos and other forms of gambling.

2) All states except Utah and Hawaii have some form of gambling.

3) Experts have said that by the end of this decade no place in the country will be more than a two hour drive from some form of legal gambling. We have never been there before. We don't know what's going to happen.

How will these initiatives be funded and how much will they cost?? I will leave the amounts to those with greater expertise but we are making a good beginning here in Louisiana with around \$2,000,000- We will need more at some stage but we must be good stewards of what we have first.

The pro-active partnering/joint venture concept between gaming industry, state government and non-profit agency is working very well for us and could be used in other areas as well.

Insofar as where the funding can come from it would seem that a federal tax on those gaming industries which do not currently pay much in the way of state taxes might be indicated, with perhaps some specific dedication of funds which are currently being received toward the treatment and prevention areas.

In closing let me simply say that if you don't think our approach will work, try it.... and if you don't think we will help you, ask us.

Thank you again for the privilege of addressing you - and thank you indeed for your attention