CHAIRMAN JAMES: Gini Fellows?

MS. FELLOWS: Madam Chair and commission members,

thank you for allowing me to address you this afternoon.

As the chair of the board of directors of the
Mississippi Council on Problem and Compulsive Gambling, and as a
clinician, I have learned to appreciate the economic developments
that have occurred in our state. I also appreciate the problems
that individuals and their families have experienced due to the
addiction to gambling.

Compulsive gamblers are not morally weak-willed
individuals. They are people who have a chronic and progressive
disease. Gambling has been a part of the Mississippi culture
since the state was founded. In the '50s, attempts were made to
stop illegal gambling.

I am aware that many forms of illegal gambling never
did stop. The difference in the past six years is that gambling
is legal and regulated.

I have worked primarily in the addictions field for
14 years. During that time, I have known individuals and
families who suffer from the consequences of addiction to
alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex, food and religion.

No one makes a conscious decision to become addicted
to any substance or any behavior. The consequences of
pathological gambling are similar to the other addictions.

In January 1996, the Mississippi Council on Problem
and Compulsive Gambling organized with funding from all of the
casinos, which was $150,000; the legislature, $100,000, which
comes through the Mississippi Gaming Commission; and then from
private donations.
Since its inception, the council has operated 24-hour
toll-free help line which has received more than 2,000 calls over
the last two years; trained 200 counselors to treat compulsive
gamblers, certifying eight; conducting four training workshops
for the clergy; completed a prevalent study and increased public
awareness through billboards, posters, brochures and public
service announcements.

The council is in the process of developing and
implementing a youth education and awareness campaign to be
implemented within the school system. In addition, we have
developed an Internet web site, themississippigambler.org, which
is a resource site for students and teachers researching
information pertaining to gambling addiction.

The majority of compulsive gamblers begin gambling as
children or adolescents, pitching pennies, marbles, cards, dice
and sports betting. Teachers and school administrators need to
recognize these behaviors and attempt to prevent future problems.

As a clinician, the problem that I have experienced
with accessing treatment for those suffering from the disease of
pathological gambling is insurance coverage: Unless there is a
co-morbid disorder, insurance companies and managed care will not
cover pathological gambling. This is a disease similar to the
other addictions and receives no coverage.

I think that the insurance industry needs to take
responsibility for full coverage of the individuals they insure,
no matter what the disease.

It is my opinion that the following issues need to be
addressed regarding problem and compulsive gambling: prevention
education for teachers, adolescents and senior citizens,
prevention education of casino employees.

In fact, all employers in the state of Mississippi
need to offer prevention education to their employees, and
insurance coverage for individuals and families suffering from
the disease of pathological gambling. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN JAMES: Thank you very much.