CHAIRMAN JAMES: Maggie LeLeaux?

MS. LeLEAUX: Madam Chair and commissioners, good evening. I'm Maggie LeLeaux, the director of the Migration and Refugee Center of Catholic Social and Community Services under the auspices of the Catholic Diocese of Biloxi.

I'm here today to share with you the positive impact casino gaming has had on our program since its passage in 1992. Before the casinos, there were no available jobs for our refugees except in the seafood factories.

Although the seafood industry has been a tremendous opportunity to us and still is by allowing us to place refugees without English skills into immediate employment, it, unfortunately, requires long hours, offers no benefits, is only seasonal employment and depends on the success of a good shrimp season.

Since the approval of dockside gaming along the Gulf Coast, many opportunities have derived from this industry and we therefore have a broad range of opportunities to assist our refugee clients in finding gainful employment.

With changes in our economy like increases in insurance, medical, housing costs and decreases in job security, people need jobs with higher wages and good benefits. The gaming industry offers these opportunities.

For the past six years, we have been working with the casino industry in placing refugees in good paying jobs with secure benefits. Each year we assist 400 to 500 refugees in obtaining gainful employment, thus decreasing their dependence on the welfare system.
We are proud to say that today there are only ten refugee families in the whole state of Mississippi who are currently in the 10-F program.

However, I do believe that there are pros and cons to gambling. People should be educated about this industry and understand that casinos should not be looked at as a get rich quick scheme but as a form of entertainment.

I also sympathize with those who have an addiction to gambling. Just a reminder that we should all be honest and admit that more positive outcomes have resulted from dockside gaming than negative.

Also, I believe that no one is forced to gamble, and if one does choose to do so, he or she must accept the responsibility for this choice, just like every choice we must make daily.

Thus, it has been a tremendous boon for our economy and the whole state of Mississippi and its people. I personally have watched this growth as when I arrived on the coast 32 years ago. My first thoughts were, what a beautiful place Biloxi could be with the right opportunities.

From the impact on my program, I believe the gaming industry is one of those right opportunities. We should all look back when the casinos were not part of our economy and thank God for this opportunity to give Mississippi a chance for a brighter future.

Thank you for allowing me this chance to share my views on this important issue.

CHAIRMAN JAMES: Thank you.