



# Lane County Public Health

## Prevention Program - Problem Gambling Prevention

Monday, February 04, 2013

Madame Chair and Members of the Committee,

As a problem gambling prevention specialist with Lane County Health & Human Services for the past 11 years, I have focused the great deal of my prevention efforts in youth and public policy. It is within those roles that I am grateful to share with you today.

Oregon Problem Gambling Services providers like me are working to address the prevention of problem gambling on a variety of levels. But before we can even begin to address a problem, people need to acknowledge it exists.

**Public awareness shows that very few people know about the issue of problem gambling.** In my county, 32 focus groups were held of various community and agency groups in the Fall 2012 for our Community Health Needs Assessment. Of the mental health and addictions issues addressed, problem gambling was the issue with the least awareness. Yes, behind all other mental health and addictions issues – problem gambling was at the very bottom. In other focus groups, parents and teachers tell us that they don't consider problem gambling as an issue. They are very surprised we provide data that shows the rate of gambling problem of Oregon youth (around four percent), and the correlations of gambling with other problem behaviors, such as the following.

Teens who gamble are twice as likely to (Oregon Student Wellness Survey, 2012):

- Have drunk alcohol in the past month
- Have binge drank in the past month
- Use tobacco
- Have skipped school in the past month
- Thought about suicide in the past month

Even among our colleagues, experts in the field often hear that problem gambling is not as serious as other addiction or mental health issues. Continually we share that problem gambling has the highest rate of suicidal ideation than any other mental health or addiction issue. Almost half (48 percent) of Oregon problem gamblers report thinking about taking their lives before entering into problem gambling treatment. One in ten people actually make an attempt on their lives (Oregon Health Authority, 2012). I cannot tell you how many times that, when I start digging, the light bulb goes on and the stories start coming.

**While it is our job at the local level to increase community awareness of the problem, it is especially challenging given the few resources we have.** Public awareness campaigns are costly. In our field, we often liken the awareness of problem gambling to that of alcohol and tobacco 40 years ago. We are far behind, have fewer



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resources, and less of a “visual” representation of what addiction looks like. Gambling addiction is far easier to hide. At the ground level, and at the state level with Oregon Problem Gambling services, we can only do so much with the resources we have. **A concerted effort from the industry is needed to help reinforce, not contradict, our efforts.**

And yet, with the culture of promoting gambling in Oregon so well defined, it is difficult to go a day without seeing some kind of promotional ad for gambling. With well over 10,000 video lottery terminals, billboards, television ads, nine casinos, ever-present Scratch-it machines and lottery kiosks, the promotional messages are everywhere. Oregon Lottery invests over \$10 million a year on promotional advertising their products. Far less funds are spent on responsible gambling and prevention messages. We need more consistent support from the industry from a policy level to provide a balanced message on gambling.

**We need to protect our most vulnerable.** Electronic gambling has been largely a grand experiment; our youth are experiencing this in the first generation, with few checks and balances, with little research that can give us an idea of what to expect. Accessibility is unprecedented. Acceptability is unprecedented. Advertising is unprecedented. The future is unknown.

**No new funding would be needed to implement responsible gambling policies.** A review of the Oregon Lottery’s reported administrative costs shows that the Lottery consistently utilizes well under its allowable 16 percent of total annual revenues for administrative expenses; currently Lottery administrative expenses are under four percent of revenue.

**Institutionalizing a proper social responsibility effort is in the State’s duty of care to protect its citizens and state from the social and economic harms of problem gambling.** The legislative intent behind the phrase “commensurate with the public good” was to operate a socially responsible lottery that sought to promote responsible gambling and take measures to minimize the number of persons that become addicted to lottery games. This is all of our responsibility.

Thank you for the opportunity to be heard on this issue.

Sincerely,

Julie Hynes, M.A., C.P.S.

Lane County Problem Gambling Prevention Coordinator

Recipient, National Council on Problem Gambling 2012 Wuelfing Award for Prevention