

Professional women most susceptible

Women in professional occupations make up the portion of the population most susceptible to gambling addiction in Detroit casinos, according to Warren Biller, executive director of the Michigan Council on Problem Gambling.

Numerous studies indicate that while compulsive gambling cuts across all socioeconomic and gender boundaries, men, minorities and those in the lower income categories become problem gamblers at disproportionately higher rates.

Among those groups, those who are susceptible are probably already hooked, he suggested. Michigan already has a variety of gambling opportunities available for them, such as horse tracks, the lottery and casinos out-of-state and nearby in Canada.

Female professionals are less likely to be traveling to existing gambling venues, Biller explained.

"They may decide to go to the Detroit casinos with friends or

coworkers to check it out and see what all the hullabaloo is about," he said. "Once there, they may end up getting bit by the bug."

Another susceptible portion of the population may never set foot inside a Detroit casino — youths.

The increasing social acceptability of gambling in Michigan leads youngsters to wager with their peers. They often see or hear of their parents gambling. Some parents may involve their children in betting activities, such as picking the winning teams in an office pool, as a way to interact with their children, Biller explained.

"We find that kids up to age 9 don't have much of a concept of what gambling and risk and chance are all about," he said. "But by the time they are 12 years old, there is a significant portion of them that is already addicted to gambling."

Children's games may contribute to the problem as they grow up.

"Kids at that age crave excitement.

And as part of their culture, with all these video games and hand held computers, they are taught that if you are good enough you can beat the system, you can win. They perceive gambling as, if you are good enough you can win, and you can get a reward in the form of money," Biller said.

"They don't realize they are two different things entirely. Video games are set up so that if you are good enough, you can win. Gaming (casino gambling) is set up so that nobody wins. Over a period of time, everybody must lose," he said.

His concern about youthful gamblers has been echoed in numerous studies, several of which have indicated problem gambling among youngsters is growing at twice the rate of adults.

"We will face in the next decade or so," the Harvard Medical School Center for Addiction Studies has predicted, "more problems with youth gambling than we'll face with drug use."

Gambling

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This treatment network is being created under laws passed by the state Legislature in 1997 after voters approved issuing licenses to three casinos in Detroit on the November 1996 ballot. Along with putting the Michigan Gaming Control Board in charge of oversight, those laws also called for a \$25 million state services fee to be split evenly and paid by the three new gaming houses. Two million dollars of the amount was set aside for the Department of Community Health for compulsive gambling prevention and treatment programs. And McBryde pointed out that the law allows the state to simply assess more on the casinos if the Gaming Control Board agrees more money is needed to address the growth in problem gambling.

At present, one casino is in operation; the MGM Grand opened in temporary facilities downtown in July. Two more applications for licenses are under review and those casinos will likely win approval to open their doors later this year or early next year.

Although Community Health had not received any of the \$2 million until MGM's license was approved this summer, the department was hard at work, McBryde said, taking over the state's compulsive gambling helpline from the state lottery bureau, establishing a website, and launching a public service

announcement advertising campaign to raise public awareness.

According to Spight, some 65 workers have received a minimum of 30 hours of training in "gambling specific" treatment to staff the state's helpline.

According to Rugles, only about 1 percent of those 140,000 new compulsive gamblers will seek treatment in the beginning. Eventually, the number will rise. "Still, that's a hefty number," she said.

To give them all an hour of one-on-one counseling each week, an equivalent of 35 new full-time therapists would be needed, Biller agreed.

To date, according to Spight, some 50 Michigan therapists have received training in how to counsel gamblers, although most will divide their time between gamblers and patients with other addictions.

"We are rapidly reaching the point of saturation," Spight said. The largest need for additional therapists, she said, is on the west side of the state at present.

Still, Biller has his reservations. "We'll see if this is like the old Russian system where workers pretend to work and the government pretends to pay them. Are they just going through the motions or are they really committed to helping gamblers with their problems?" he asked.

Gamblers can't rely on their old excuses

"Because there is no chemical intoxication involved, there's no ingestion of substances, the gambler can't blame his behavior on being under the influence. As a result, there is a great deal more shame involved," Lori Rugles, Clinical Director of Trimerid-an Inc., explained.

"They do horrendous things to people they really care about. These are not anti-social personalities. These are people who care deeply about their family, their friends, their coworkers.

"And they do terrible things financially and emotionally to these people to protect their gambling money, to be able to continue their gambling, to deceive their family about the condition of their finances."

Lying, manipulation, stealing and cheating are all a part of the disorder.

"They can't say, well, I did that under the influence. It was just me in here ... To continue doing these

things, they have to develop incredible psychological defenses and denial about the impact of what they are doing and the consequences. So when they come in for treatment, there are levels and levels and levels you have to break through."

Gamblers are the toughest of addicted patients to treat, according to Rugles, who has been training Michigan therapists in how to treat addicted gamblers. Although alcoholics and drug users certainly have their forms of denial, once sober, those defenses are "peeled away much more quickly," she said.

Treatment for gamblers is structured much the same as it is for substances abusers. There may be inpatient treatment for some period of time. One-on-one

counseling is often used. And follow up with a support group like Gamblers Anonymous is important. Treatment follows the 12-step process used for the chemically addicted.

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