

**NEW YORK STATE GAMING COMMISSION
PUBLIC FORUM ON PROBLEM GAMBLING AND CASINO DEVELOPMENT
Wednesday, April 9, 2014**

Subject: Problem Gambling and Commercial Casino Development

Purpose: The Commission will take testimony from knowledgeable professionals, **advocates** and public officials, as well as academics and practitioners in the field of problem gambling in an effort to guide the development of an industry best practices framework for casino operators to establish a responsible gambling program and for regulators to appropriately address compulsive and problem gambling related issues throughout the gaming industries.

Commission Chair Mark Gearan will host a public forum to discuss **what to expect in terms of problem gambling impact and challenges** when commercial casinos open in the state, as well as to identify industry best practices for both casino operators and regulators to address those challenges.

Areas to be explored will include:

- Expectations of problem gambling prevalence once commercial casinos open
- **Specific components of a casino applicant's problem gambling plan**
- Industry best practices for operators and regulators
- The efficacy of policies in other commercial gaming jurisdictions
- The efficacy of self-exclusion programs and how they could be improved

Text of expected testimony
Mrs. Gloria Block

As I look over the above announcement for this forum and emails I received regarding its goals, I have to ask myself: Why am I here? How can I help accomplish the important purpose of this public forum?

Focusing on words from your communications, here's how I answered my own questions: I am going to share some experiences that will help you understand **what to expect in terms of problem gambling impact and challenges** and why I am an **advocate**, pleading the case for those who might become touched by the disease of problem gambling. I hope that by sharing my experiences, your commission will have more ideas **about the specific components to include in a problem gambling plan.**

PART 1

Good afternoon. I'll first introduce myself as Gloria B., a current member of a self-help group for family members and friends of problem gamblers. In my case, the problem gambler is my husband, who is currently in recovery. We've been attending weekly meetings in Staten Island, NY since 1975, over thirty-eight years. At this time, we also attend a weekly meeting in Brooklyn, NY.

Some brief background: By the year 1975,

- I had been married for ten years
 - Had two young children, ages four and six
 - Had a mortgage and other bills to pay
 - I was an out-of-work teacher, due to NYC layoffs in the 1970s
- *One might say . . . all ordinary life events, blessings and challenges -*
- Except, I was also struggling with the effects of being married to and being financially dependent on a compulsive gambler.

I was frightened, embarrassed and ashamed. I was unable to pay bills because my husband was using his salary for gambling, and I was suffering with emotional abuse as he unsuccessfully tried to juggle the negative consequences of his thoughts and behavior.

In desperation, after spending nights alone while my husband was out gambling, and having absolutely no more money in a small bank account that I had drained to pay bills and buy food for my children, I attended my first meeting of a Staten Island 12-Step recovery group for family members and friends of problem gamblers. Shortly after my first meeting, my husband started attending a 12-step self-help group for problem gamblers, and to my knowledge and by his own admission, he has not gambled since his first meeting. I am grateful to our fellowships for their support and wisdom and for sharing their experiences in recovery. Obviously, since I still attend meetings, I recognize that this is an illness that cannot be cured, only arrested. I need the ongoing support and lifeline that my 12-step fellowship provides.

Here's something else I've learned in the 38+ years I've been attending meetings. Sometimes meetings are not enough. We're not professionals. Sometimes in recovery, we get stuck and stay in the same place, not knowing how to face the challenges of being a husband, wife, parent, child or friend of a compulsive gambler. Life is hard enough, without even considering the lingering effects and scars of the gambling problem.

My husband and I were fortunate to be among the first clients of the Staten Island Gamblers' Treatment Center in the early 1980s. Before even becoming clients at the Treatment Center, we met some of the therapists through our 12-step recovery meetings. They were being specially trained to treat problem gamblers and their families. They came to open meetings and sought permission to sit in at our closed weekly meetings to gain insight into problem gambling and

how it affects the entire family. They became specialists in treating problem gamblers and their families. They learned the 12 steps and how they apply in daily life, they understood the importance of a Pressure Relief Meeting, and they understood the scars that remain about financial insecurity, trust and honesty.

So, as an **advocate for treatment for problem gamblers and their families**, how do I hope the above experiences will help you decide on **what to include in a problem gambling plan?**

A. You need knowledge of specific gambling related self-help groups in the area(s) of the casino(s) – where they meet, what time, what day of the week. You need to know how they work and how to convince those struggling with the problem to attend. It's not easy to take that first step alone.

B. You need liaisons with professional treatment centers. These treatment centers must be staffed by providers who have been specifically trained and certified to help those affected by the disease of problem gambling. They must be centers of excellence, where those struggling with the problem can find knowing and experienced therapists. The therapists must support and work hand-in-hand with the self-help groups.

PART 2

I'm now going to re-introduce myself as Mrs. Block, recently retired New York City schoolteacher. In 1990, I was working at a public school on Staten Island, as a fifth grade teacher. I'm going to tell you about a student, who we'll call Bobby.

That particular year, by the end of October, I noticed a change in Bobby. Homework was not coming in on time and when it did, it was of poor quality. Bobby was noticeably tired in class and his classwork was suffering.

We were going on a fossil-hunting trip in November, and the kids were so excited. They had to bring in a signed parent consent slip and a small fee for the chartered bus.

After a week, Bobby had still not returned his consent slip and bus fee. When I questioned him, he whispered, "my mother said I can't go." I created an opportunity to talk with him privately, and tearfully, but with anger, he told me that his mother threw his father out because he always goes to the casino and gambles. They would fight at night when they thought Bobby was asleep and screamed at each other because his father spent all the money in the casino. Bobby said his mother told him that if he wanted to go on the fossil hunting trip, "he'd have to wait until he saw his father and ask him for the money, but don't count on getting it from the bum." Is it any wonder that this child couldn't focus on his schoolwork?

The next night was Open School Night, and I knew I'd be seeing at least one of Bobby's parents. I went to see our school social worker and in confidence,

explained what was going on with Bobby and asked if she could help. She told me to ask the parent to come see her after the appointment in my classroom the next night. Perhaps they'd initiate a referral for Bobby to see her and talk about why his schoolwork was suffering, thus opening up a line of communication. We couldn't force them to do or disclose anything.

She showed me a paper that was hanging on the wall over her right shoulder. It listed local agencies that treated alcohol, drug and physical abuse and other health or financial issues. She said she makes copies of this list and gives it to parents who need help with their problems. However, she said there was no specific gambling treatment place on Staten Island where she could refer Bobby's parents, even if they chose to tell her about the gambling issue.

Without disclosing my own history, I told the social worker about the Gamblers' Treatment Center on Staten Island. She was not aware that such a place existed, but said she would check it out.

The next evening, before I had my first parent conference, I went back to her office and saw that she had revised that list over her right shoulder. The Gamblers' Treatment Center had been written in by hand on the bottom.

Bobby's mom did agree to see the social worker that night. I don't know what they discussed. I know that she went home with a copy of that revised list. I also know that Bobby's work and behavior improved and he did go fossil hunting.

Through the years, I've seen other children affected by adults' lack of knowledge or common sense about the harmful effects of gambling.

As Atlantic City casinos became popular, I often had students who were absent from school on Mondays or came to school sleepy and without homework on Mondays. They'd offer the excuse, "I had to go to Atlantic City with my parents for the weekend. They brought my big cousin along to baby-sit when they went out. We played video games and pigged out! We got back home too late on Sunday night, so my mother said I could sleep late on Monday, or my mother said it was OK for me not to have my homework. The teacher would understand."

Well, this teacher did not understand.

I wonder if those parents realized what they were modeling and sanctifying in the eyes of their children. Is it OK to neglect your responsibilities so that you can gamble? In school, we host programs that teach 5th graders about the dangers of drug and alcohol abuse. Quite to the contrary, the message they get about gambling is: "Casinos are great fun for adults. It must be OK because my parents let me hang out in Atlantic City so that they can gamble."

So, again, as an **advocate for treatment and prevention of problem gambling**, how do I hope the above experiences will help you decide on **what to include in a problem gambling plan?**

A. There will be lots of advertising, making casinos look appealing and inviting. Understand the influence on young children. What's the message to them?

B. If parents choose to go to a casino and bring their children along for the weekend, have a program in place, reminding parents of a healthy message about healthy behavior that they want to impart to their children.

C. Strengthen liaisons with schools in the areas of the new casinos. Teachers and school support teams must be alerted to the warning signs of how all family members could be affected by problem gamblers. School support teams should have knowledge of professional treatment centers of excellence where they can make referrals if needed.

Thank you for listening to my personal experiences and my concerns about what could happen to adults and children as new casinos come to New York State.

Gloria Block
51 Stanley Circle
Staten Island, NY 10308
(718) 984-5403 / (917) 846-2558
GBlock51@aol.com