

House Bill 194—Opponent Testimony
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House Finance Committee

Chairman Oelslager, Vice chairman Scherer, Ranking member Cera and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on concerns over House Bill 194, which would expand gambling, and its inherent negative problems, in Ohio.

I come to you today on behalf of a number of organizations, including Citizens for Community Values, the Family Policy Council (FPC) for Ohio, the Institute for Principled Policy, and Ohio Values Voters, Inc., all of whom are alarmed by the threat to families posed by this measure.

HB 194 has been brought to you as a measure to help Ohio jump on the train of states moving to legalize sports betting in Ohio in the wake of a decision by the US Supreme Court allowing it. But what exactly are we jumping on?

For many, the belief that gambling, or “gaming” as the industry like to call it, is a harmless diversion providing entertainment ignores the reality that gambling actually is an addictive behavior which works on the brain similarly to the way opioids do. Scientifically, addiction is now defined as repeatedly pursuing a rewarding experience despite serious repercussions, rather than dependency on a chemical.

Medical Daily reports on a study presented to an international conference on brain science in 2014, in which “researchers used positron emission tomography (PET) scans to measure opioid receptor levels in the brains of 14 pathological gamblers and 15 healthy volunteers. There was no difference between the two groups. However, when they scanned their brains after giving each participant an amphetamine tablet, which causes a high known as an endorphin rush, they found that gamblers weren't able to release as many endorphins. After the participants answered a questionnaire, they also found that gamblers experienced a lower feeling of euphoria.

"From our work, we can say two things," lead researcher Dr. Inge Mick said in a statement. "Firstly, the brains of pathological gamblers respond differently to this stimulation than the brains of healthy volunteers. And secondly, it seems that pathological gamblers just don't get the same feeling of euphoria as do healthy volunteers. This may go some way to explaining why the gambling becomes an addiction."

Therapists have found that pathological gamblers respond much better to medication and therapy typically used for addictions. Opioid antagonists, such as naltrexone, which indirectly inhibit brain cells from producing dopamine, thereby reducing cravings, are proving much more effective in treating problem gambling.

Scientific American, discussing multiple studies on the opioidal effects of gambling, noted that “neuroscientists have learned that drugs and gambling alter many of the same brain circuits in similar ways. These insights come from studies of blood flow and electrical activity in people's brains as they complete various tasks on computers that either mimic casino games or test their impulse control.”

For Ohio to authorize sports betting, especially mobile-based betting, could be setting us up for a crisis similar to the one we currently face, and spend hundreds of millions of dollars to combat: the opioid addiction crisis. Some other states' experiences tend to be in that direction:

According to a report from National Public Radio, the state of New Jersey launched sports betting last June and then added mobile betting two months later. Neva Pryor, who runs the NJ Council on Compulsive Gambling, said that the council's hotline is now experiencing a 22 percent increase in calls. She states: "That's where our concern is is that it's so accessible and it's so easy to do and your credit card is linked to it."

Addictions similar to our current opioid crisis, significant upswings in people seeking help from our problem gaming hotlines, and more dollars having to be spent in social services to address problems this bill will allow: we don't believe this is a "safe bet" for Ohio's taxpayers or our families, and would respectfully ask this committee to reject this legislation.

Thank you for your kind attention. I would be happy to take questions of the committee.