

**Testimony of Jacqueline Irving
Opposing HB298**

Ohio House Finance Committee

June 1, 2025

Dear Chairman Manning and Committee members:

I am writing in strong opposition to HB298. I urge you to vote to oppose passage of this bill that would further enable online gambling in Ohio by legalizing online casino gambling.

In December 2024, my son, Xavier, should have celebrated his 29th birthday. But we were not able to celebrate it—or any future birthday he should have had. I lost my son to suicide in May of the same year. I had no indication ahead of time that he was in a place whereby he would suddenly take his own life.

I knew that, just over four years after graduating university, he was going through a shift in career goals and also was reconsidering whether he wanted to remain in Columbus, Ohio. By outward appearances, however, he seemed to be managing this transition, which is not an uncommon state of mind for young people in their late 20s.

I did not know, until after his death, that he had lost thousands of his hard-earned money. He kept secret from me that a sports gambling problem had overtaken his life and mind.

Based on evidence I gathered after my son's sudden death, I would argue online gambling is mostly about exploiting and endangering people's lives in the name of this predatory industry's greed.

Many people are aware that the smartphone has fueled a rapid boom in online gambling's popularity. Most people, however, are unaware of the insidious ways the industry employs this technology to collect personal data—more than 90 different data points, according to one source (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=vDsLuOCWcgk>). Armed with knowledge of an individual's betting tendencies, the industry cultivates and fuels addiction, directly targeting those it identifies as emerging problem gamblers.

Horrified as I examined my son's phone after his death, I saw first-hand how sports gambling operators offered him free box seat tickets to appealing live sports events. Personalized texts from a "VIP host," also offered him "free" (couple hundred dollar) amounts of gambling money to ensure he remained actively engaged with multiple gambling apps on his phone. I continue to receive in his forwarded mail numerous flyers from the casino in Columbus, offering him gambling money and other financial incentives to gamble in person, as part of the synergistic media campaign waged to keep online gamblers gambling through various channels.

Many see online sports gambling as a social activity and different from the lone gambler losing money at a casino. However, the \$10,000 bet my son frenetically placed on a (losing) NHL Stanley Cup game team during the last 48 hours of his life was followed by a series of still more frenetic bets placed in isolation on his phone as he tried to win back his massive loss.

Many are lured into thinking this activity must be benign because we consider sports as healthy activities. Sports gamblers often delude themselves when they do win that they are drawing on “skill”—their knowledge of sports. The gambling industry knows and exploits all this.

Until he became ensnared by online sports gambling apps, my son had saved a considerable amount of his earnings after graduating college in 2019. Looking for answers, I analyzed my son’s phone after his death, discovering too late the increasingly frenzied sports gambling inflow and outflow activity in his account during his last several months.

Many believe alcohol and tobacco - which have helped fund government budgets through taxes - are responsible for more catastrophic harm. Yet, studies in the US have reported “those with [gambling disorder] GD had the highest suicide rate of any addiction disorder with one in five GD patients having attempted suicide” (<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9983450>).

Proponents of gambling may argue Americans should be free to choose how they spend their time and earnings. Did my son - and others whose money and lives were taken from them - live their shortened lives “in freedom,” once ensnared by these addictive apps?

I urge you to reflect on what happened to my son, a 9-year resident of your state until his death last year, and vote to oppose passage of this bill, which will surely worsen the existing online gambling epidemic and result in further victims.

Sincerely,

Jacqueline Irving