

Stop Predatory Gambling

As a double boarded physician who provides extensive teaching related to gambling disorder and also a single mom who has personally suffered from the explosion of online gambling in the state of Pennsylvania, I am a strong opponent to gambling expansion anywhere.

The latest neighboring Penn State Gambling Report requested by the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board highlighting 2024 findings showed that 20% or 1 in 5 Pennsylvanians are now gambling online. This uptick coincides with calls to the 1-800-GAMBLER hotline mentioning online gambling, which represented almost half of all intake calls. Gambling expansion hurt several neighboring Pennsylvanians and cost individual PA citizens a total of \$2.1 billion dollars last year. This by definition is taxation by exploitation as evidenced by the relationship that needs to exist between a state government and gambling operators for this product to expand.

Furthermore, the predatory nature of gambling operators including misleading bonuses, VIP host programs that target the addicted gambler and relentless incentives to continue gambling without any regulation are extremely harmful to individuals. Even with current restrictions being discussed in S.B.197 limiting current state operations to expand, the nature of this expansion will lead to further invitation and explosion which will be hard to regulate and continue to increase a silent public health epidemic of gambling disorder among Ohio's citizens.

Study after study has shown that a rise in gambling opportunities is mirrored by a rise in gambling problems. A timely study in *JAMA* released just this February highlighted a 23% national increase in help-seeking internet searches for gambling problems after the 2018 Supreme Court decision, which led to an explosion in sportsbooks. The increase in help-seeking searches was more pronounced following the opening of an online sportsbook compared with an in-person sportsbook.

When it comes to regulations and programs such as “1800Gambler” that are often the main “protective mechanism” by state gaming boards take a second to imagine this scenario with me:

You're an individual who has recognized that you are suffering from alcohol use disorder and decide you want to get help. Now imagine leaving your house to go to your first appointment for treatment and finding a bottle of alcohol courtesy of the company that makes your preferred alcoholic beverage at your doorstep. After thinking you can always start treatment after consuming this last drink, you then find coupons for free bottles that

can only be used next month. After going through this month after month, with rewards increasingly relentless over time, you eventually receive a diagnosis of liver failure.

Now, imagine being told you should have drunk responsibly and called an 800 number to get help during this process, and that you are no longer eligible for coupons because you have been forced to reduce your drinking after hitting rock bottom with your health.

Gambling operators have openly reported that most of their profit (70 to 90%) comes from the “problem gambler,” so there is little incentive to do much to prevent addiction besides the “responsible gaming/1800Gamblers” approach (which is 90% funded by commercialized gambling operators), leaving the fault and stigma to those who suffer from gambling disorder.

With extensive content creators, marketing staff, and data-tracking capabilities at their disposal, online gambling operators are doing just this. First, they entice new users with signup bonuses, celebrity endorsements, and claims of “risk-free” initial betting, then maintain individuals in the trap with misleading bonus offers, promotions, and/or VIP status to those who bet more. The visual content on these apps is also designed to stimulate the right areas in the brain to keep the habit going.

Though younger, impulsive individuals (e.g., college students) are prime targets for online gambling, anyone can be snared. Despite my wealth of knowledge as a physician, I was unable to release myself from the grasp of these products. Less than a year after downloading my first online casino app, I lost my savings, part of my retirement, and almost my home.

Until recently I held my addiction with the same shame, stigma, and loneliness that those affected by gambling disorder frequently kept hidden. I am no doubt in the beginning of a long recovery journey. But now I am starting to view my addiction with less shame but with more questions.

I have started to question whether “problem gambling” and “responsible gaming” are distractions created by a self-regulated behemoth of an industry. I question whose interest lawmakers had in mind for the seven states thus far that have unleashed legalized gambling onto their fellow citizens. I wonder if “responsible gaming” is just pointing the finger back at consumers that have been stripped of protections. I question if “problem gambling” is the correct term at all for this month or if all gambling has turned problematic due to the nature of the industry. Most of all, I question what we will do as citizens and lawmakers to stop this. In states where gambling is legal, will the gaming industry continue to be allowed to take advantage of its citizens? Will lawmakers demand that consumers are protected from exploitive behaviors of the gaming industry? And how will we protect consumers in states like Ohio currently discussing unleashing their own commercialized gambling products to the public and an impending gambling epidemic?