

Jess Stewart, Recovery Advocate
Interested Party Testimony on SB 196
Ohio State Senate Select Committee on Gaming

Chairman Schuring, Vice-Chair Manning and Members of the Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony as an interested party regarding legalizing sports gaming here in Ohio. I've been a recovering problem gambler since May of 2016. Prior to that, gambling was a part of my life off and on for almost 40 years. In the end, I was an out of control compulsive and pathological gambler with suicidal ideations.

Surprisingly given everything I've gone through, I'm not anti-gambling. It has been around since the founding of our nation. Many prestigious universities such as Harvard, Yale, William & Mary, and Princeton were at least partially funded through lotteries. Ninety percent of citizens who gamble can do so responsibly. For the ten percent who cannot, it's critical that strong consumer protections are in place, and funding is provided for prevention and treatment services.

I'm pleased to see in reading the 256 pages of this bill that 2% is set aside for problem gambling services. There is no doubt whatsoever that the legalization of sports betting and other gambling expansion will lead to an entirely new class of problem gamblers. I witnessed this firsthand while working at a treatment center for problem gambling last year. They saw a large increase in the number of sports bettors coming in from numerous states for treatment. The demographics of clients became much younger. The majority of male clients were between the ages of 18-25 years old.

I'm submitting testimony today on this bill because as a former gambler and current advocate my role is to raise awareness and speak out when I see issues or concerns that will impact the lives of those gamblers who cannot gamble responsibly. This bill provides a number of concerns for me. I want to focus on two major areas in my testimony even though I have other reservations. I want to go on record as to what my main concerns are and

my reasoning, in the hope that the final bill will address these issues or the Ohio Casino Control Commission will see wisdom in their decisions about what will be permitted.

First, it comes as no surprise to me that the bill includes betting on college sports as it makes up about 30 percent of the betting market. The wise course would simply limit it to only collegiate football and basketball. There is little if any reason in my opinion to expand it beyond those two sports. Betting on teams located in Ohio should be excluded entirely.

It has already been made clear by the Ohio colleges and universities that they want to be excluded. They know that it risks the integrity of the sport and the potential of games being compromised. They are aware of the potential pressure that can be placed upon select student athletes with the promise of money. Why put these young men at risk of this? A promising life or career could be ruined if someone succumbed to such pressure and got caught in the process.

If Ohio games are excluded, it also lessens the risk of gambling by Ohio college students. It won't remove it entirely of course but it will serve to reduce the number of students who would otherwise want to bet on their team. In the same way, it will also reduce the number of underage students who could, and would, seek out ways to get in on the action. The goal should be to prevent these types of situations from even being possible. Are we trying to protect underage students from gambling or giving them a reason to?

If you allow betting on Ohio State, Cincinnati, and Toledo to name just a few you are going to have underage students placing bets through a proxy. They will simply find someone 21 or over and get them to place the bets for them. The proxy will do so and take a cut of any winnings. This isn't speculation on my part. It's a fact. Ohio already has a bad reputation when it comes to sports athletes and gambling. We don't need to risk underage students, athletes, or universities being involved in something illegal.

The other area of major concern for me is with proposition bets. There absolutely needs to be limitations placed on the use of these. Otherwise, you are going to be opening a “Pandora’s Box”. The use of these alone if left unlimited and unchecked will lead to a huge increase in problem gambling by itself. Proposition bets can be created at will on just a single game or event. I cringe to think of the ramifications and potential losses someone can accrue over the course of a single game for having a bad night. How about multiple games?

Mobile betting, while certainly convenient, also brings about a heightened risk of problem gambling. There should be and needs to be some sort of limitations placed on this element as well. An individual can sit at home on their couch or go to a sports bar and watch multiple games all at once and place bets throughout on every one of them if they choose without limitations? Is allowing something like this reasonable? Where is the protection? It better be in there somewhere. It’s this type of individual who can quickly become a problem gambler. If they are losing money, the pattern will quickly shift to increasing their wagers as they begin chasing their earlier losses.

Gambling losses can rack up quickly regardless of the type of gambling itself. What often exacerbates the situation is when an individual bets money that they can’t afford to lose but takes the risk anyway in hopes of winning big or getting ahead. Unfortunately, that rarely happens. This issue impacts more than just the individual gambler when things go bad. It impacts relationships, loved ones, friends, families, workplaces, communities, taxpayers, and sometimes the legal system.

If the right measures and protections are not in place for this bill, there will be regrets later on. Someone’s life likely depends on it. For reasons I already spoke of in my testimony today, problem gambling carries the highest rate of suicide and attempted suicide of all addictions. For veterans the rate is even higher. We know from the 2017 Ohio gambling survey that the problem gambling rate doubled after the casinos and racinos opened.

This expansion will see another increase. How much is yet to be determined.

In your rush to get this pushed through and signed into law, I hope you consider the ramifications and make sure your children, and grandchildren are protected in this legislation. The odds are, no pun intended, that one of you on this committee could have someone close to you, either close friend or family that develops a gambling problem. It is a disease, not some moral failure as some like to claim. It's insidious and doesn't discriminate. I could no more control my gambling than an alcoholic can control their drinking or someone with a drug addiction can stop using without help. I'm fully aware that you're under pressure to get this done quickly. I believe given the stakes that it's more important to make sure it's done right.

Thank you Mr. Chairman for your time and attention. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have at this time.