

## **Gambling funds could be used to fight addictions**

by Chris Green, Harris News Service, [cgreen@dailynews.net](mailto:cgreen@dailynews.net), 5/26/2007

TOPEKA - Two percent may not be a lot but that small figure could produce a windfall that doubles state funding to fight addictions. In authorizing four state-owned destination casinos and slot machines at three racetracks earlier this year, state lawmakers dedicated that portion of new gaming profits for the prevention and treatment of gambling, alcohol and drug problems.

The addition could mean millions of dollars to drastically increase aid to deal with problem gambling. Kansas now ranks 25th out of the 26 states that provide funds to assist compulsive gamblers. It could also help expand sorely needed treatment of substance abuse, particularly in underserved parts of the state, especially southeast and western Kansas, said Abbie Hodgson, spokeswoman for the state Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services.

The additional funding would come at time when the number of people accessing state services for substance abuse treatment is steadily rising and Kansas is meeting only a small fraction of the estimated need. Derise Unruh, executive director of New Chance, Inc., in Dodge City, said a funding increase is long overdue and that her organization has been providing about \$30,000 a year in unfunded services.

"It's been neglected way too long," Unruh said. "Substance abuse is almost involved in everything you can think of, from crime to neglected children to other SRS issues, unemployment in the workforce, but yet there's very little funds for dealing with it."

One of the chief backers of the new funds, Rep. Charlie Roth, R-Salina, praised the change. "This is a significant step forward to continue toward additional treatment in Kansas," said Roth, who joined the push for expanded gambling legislation in the House.

Diverting some gaming revenues to cope with social ills isn't a new concept. For years, Kansas has directed \$100,000, primarily from the state's lottery profits, toward a special problem gambling fund. What's changed is the amount of money lawmakers decided to devote to the problem and the scope of addictions that would be addressed by that aid. As a result of the new gambling law, the state addictions fund could receive up to \$4 million more in the 2008 budget year, which begins July 1, said Hodgson, whose agency is responsible for distributing the aid.

By 2010, should the state's casinos be fully operational, gambling could contribute as much as \$17 million to \$18 million a year to the fund, she said.

In addition, under a change in this year's law, the dollars may not go exclusively to fight compulsive gambling. Lawmakers expanded the fund to include alcohol and drug abuse.

Les Sperling, chief executive officer of the Salina-based Central Kansas Foundation, said his organization, which serves around 1,200 people each year in north-central Kansas, would work closely with state officials to make sure more people receive help. "We are very pleased that the Legislature recognizes that gambling and other addictions are important problems that need to be addressed in Kansas," he said. Hodgson said officials are in the initial stages of determining how to spend the new money.

It's unclear exactly how much money from expanded gambling will go into addictions prevention and treatment, especially with the law facing a potential court challenge over its constitutionality. The best-case scenarios assume that slot machines at three racetracks would be running in 2008 and that the casinos would be operational by 2010.

"We're still fairly hesitant about how quickly that money will be coming in and how much we'll have," Hodgson said. "Obviously they're projecting large sums of money and we can only hope that we do, in fact, get that much money. However, I think realistically that's probably in the more distant future instead of the near future." Plus, some critics argue that lawmakers haven't been especially generous.

Glenn Thompson, executive director of Stand Up for Kansas, a Wichita-based group that opposes gambling, said the money provided by lawmakers only scratches the surface of what's needed and served mainly as additional justification to pass an expanded gambling bill. "The problem gambling fund is trivial compared to the social costs," Thompson said.

### Promising move

Despite the uncertainty surrounding the additional funds for addictions, treatment professionals hailed the Legislature's action this past session as a promising move. Duane Olberding, president of the Kansas Coalition on Problem Gambling, said treatment for addictions receives less funding than other mental health issues. The \$100,000 a year the state has set aside for gambling addictions has been inadequate, he said.

Although the state has provided some funds for prevention - including advertising a state hotline to help problem gamblers, 1-866-662-3800 - Olberding said there hasn't been any funding for treatment. That's not an uncommon phenomenon, said Dr. Dennis McNeilly, president of the National Council on Problem Gambling and an associate professor of psychiatry at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. McNeilly said that many states initially underestimated the social costs of gambling and have been reevaluating their approach in recent years.

A study cited by SRS found last year that of the 48 states that permit some form of legalized gambling, only 26 of them use a portion of gaming revenues to prevent and treat problem gambling. Kansas ranked 25th out of the 26 states that provide funds.

"If this is an opportunity for Kansas to catch up, then that's a tremendous stride," McNeilly said. In fact, if the state's addictions fund generated \$4 million in 2008, Kansas would be among the nation's leaders in funds for combating gambling problems, Hodgson said.

By 2010, the up to \$18 million that could be generated for the fund would be equal to about half of what all states now spend. Olberding said the influx of aid would put Kansas on the "leading edge" among states trying to cope with the problem of gambling addictions. "It's showing that our Legislature has some understanding of the problems that go along with gambling and lawmakers are using some of that money to deal with the problems that are associated with gambling in a wise way," Olberding said. "It's more than just a Band-Aid. It's a proactive approach."

### Expanding treatment

The state's push to better address addictions in the state through expanded gambling revenues goes beyond just problem gambling. In directing 2 percent of the state's new gaming revenues toward the problem, lawmakers expanded the scope of the addictions fund to include substance abuse and other destructive habits. The change came largely at the behest of two lawmakers, Roth and Rep. Pat George, R-Dodge City, said Stuart Little, a lobbyist whose clients include the state's addiction professionals.

George, who's served on national substance abuse task forces, said he and Roth both have a passion for treatment and thought the change could help the state. "We thought this would be a way to expand what we're currently doing and we highly encouraged that," George said.

It's a move that makes sense as well, treatment professionals say, because individuals who suffer from problem gambling often also suffer from other difficulties, such as substance abuse. "Many people experience multiple problems related to addiction," Sperling said.

The state could wind up doubling the \$15.8 million it now spends on all addiction prevention and services by 2010. Kansas spends \$36.8 million overall on addictions but \$21 million comes from federal grants and Medicaid funds. But a 2006 study conducted for SRS by a Wyoming company estimated that 10 percent of Kansans, 200,000 adults and 25,000 adolescents, need treatment for substance abuse. The problems cost the state budget \$583 million a year, according to a national study cited in the report. That includes \$185 million for adult and juvenile corrections.

Every \$1 spent on treatment can result in as much as \$7 in costs reductions. But only a fraction of people in need of treatment receive SRS services. Of the 70,500 who would be eligible, the Legislature funded the treatment of only 13,000 in fiscal year 2005. Among the areas with the greatest need for treatment and insufficient capacity, according to the report, are the state's northwest and southeast corners.

The report also recommended that the state expand the continuum of care in Finney, Seward and Ellis counties, particularly through programs for Hispanic populations, adolescents and women. In distributing the new money from gambling, Hodgson said SRS officials believe that legislators intended to make problem gambling the priority for the new funding.

After that, social services officials would hope to use the money to expand substance abuse treatment, particularly to benefit those areas underserved, Hodgson said. Treatment professionals don't think problem gambling will grow to a point that it eats up all new money.

In expanding gambling opportunities in the state, Olberding said lawmakers simply made sure to take responsibility for what they were doing. "Any time you have more accessibility, you're going to have more problems," Olberding said. "But expanded gambling was going to happen anyway. At least this time, people did look at it and say, 'Hey, we've got to have some real social accountability here.'"

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