

New York Gaming Commission

Mark D. Gearan, Chairman

Public Forum On

Problem Gambling and Casino Development

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Good afternoon Chairman Gearan and members of the Commission. My name is Stephen Block. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on a subject that has helped define me for over 60 years. My association with gambling has gone from pre-teen gambler to problem gambler in my teens and twenties, to beginning my recovery in my thirties, and then being an advocate, counselor and expert witness in the state and federal courts. At an early age, I played poker in the basement of my apartment house in Brooklyn and bet with the local bookmaker. I progressed to waiting at the newsstand for the *Daily Racing Form* and *the Daily News* (when it sold for 2 cents) to prepare for the next day's races. I gambled throughout high school and college and through the first ten years of my marriage. It is said that a problem gambler has a negative impact on at least 12 other people. For me, I caused problems for not only my parents, but my grandparents, my brother and later on my in-laws, my wife and our two small children, along with countless friends, employers and co-workers. I finally stopped the downward spiral when my wife reached out for help after many years of my destructive gambling. A combination of professional counseling and self-help meetings helped me turn my life around. I speak from experience when I state that treatment works. With the help I received and the support of my family, I have not gambled in almost 39 years.

I was involved in the formation of the first state funded gambling treatment program at St. Vincent's Catholic Medical Center in Staten Island in 1981. I was co-founder of the New York Council on Problem Gambling in 1993 and I am certified by New York State as a Credentialed Problem Gambling

Counselor. I am one of only 30 in all of New York State to qualify for this credential. Over the years I have accumulated over 30,000 gambling specific treatment hours working at the Gamblers Treatment Center and the SAFE Foundation. I have seen the devastation that gambling can create and the miracle of recovery for those who are given the opportunity to access services.

In my many years of working with problem gamblers and their families, it has become clear to me that a combination of self-help support groups and individual and group therapy leads to the best outcomes. I can speak of the father of five who stopped gambling and became a productive member of society and who is now working in a program helping the homeless transition to supportive housing. I worked with a man who was given an alternative to incarceration sentence and who now operates a successful security equipment business; and the young lady who after several years of casino gambling went from attempting to take her own life to becoming an internet entrepreneur. I recall the young Wall Street executive who was fired from a major investment bank for gambling on his office computer, who after treatment, secured a position with another firm and has recently been made a managing director.

Unfortunately, not all New Yorkers are able to get the help they need. Treatment is not always accessible or affordable. In 1995, when the New York Council on Problem Gambling was incorporated, one of our stated goals was to provide treatment services in all 62 of New York's counties. Today, 19 years later, treatment programs are available in about 1/3 of our 62 counties. There are no services for problem gambling in many of our most populated areas. Because gambling treatment is generally not covered by insurance, many potential clients are not able to get services unless they have a co-occurring substance abuse or mental health diagnosis.

Gambling treatment in New York State was originally administered by, and funded through the Office of Mental Health. For the past eleven years that responsibility has transitioned to OASAS. From a clinical perspective, pathological or disordered gambling is now classified by the DSM-5 as a behavioral addiction. The current research indicates that pathological gambling has a unique spectrum of diagnostic criteria that include aspects of mental dysfunction as well as elements of addictive thinking and

behavior. It is a bio-psycho-social disorder that requires a specialized approach in treatment to achieve positive outcomes. Combining gamblers in treatment with substance abusers and clients with mental problems is often done for expediency, and while there is some success using this approach, gambling specific treatment by qualified professionals is, from my experience, more efficacious. The challenges are many. Treatment needs to be made available to all those in need. The present system is not working. We need to expand our vision and provide resources for all New Yorkers. I believe we need to concentrate a wide spectrum of gambling specific services in one location to achieve this goal. Research conducted by New York State indicates that up to one million citizens have a gambling problem. According to a study conducted by the National Council on Problem Gambling in 2013, New York State ranked 27th out of 50 states in terms of per-capita public funds invested in problem gambling services. We're New Yorkers; we can do better for those adversely affected.

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