

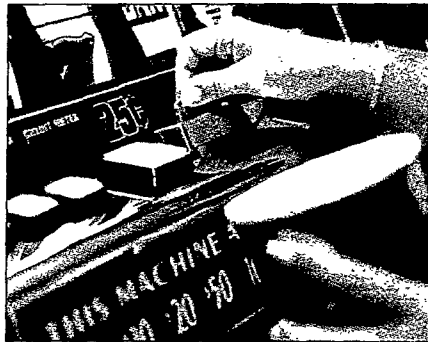
Problem gambling grows

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

Casino advertisements fill television screens with spinning wheels and smiling people. Fun, excitement, action — and, of course, the prospect of hitting it big — are all presented as very real possibilities.

Missing from these come-ons is what happens when the action stops. For every big winner, many more folks leave casinos with thinner wallets. And, in the case of problem gamblers, their life's savings can disappear as they tumble deeply into debt.

As venues for legalized gambling in New York continue to swell, so does the potential for problem gambling. Newer forms of the state lottery, such as Quick Draw and vending-machine cards, have infiltrated bars, restaurants and supermarkets. For people living in and near the Rochester Diocese, casino gambling is at full throttle: Turning Stone Casino near Utica opened in 1993 as the first legalized casino in New York state, followed by Casino Niagara in Niagara Falls, Ontario, in 1996; Fort



SeniorLife

Erie (Ontario) Slots near Buffalo, in 1999; and Seneca Niagara Casino in Niagara Falls, N.Y., this past Dec. 31.

According to Raymond Scott, an expert on gambling addiction, senior citizens are a "very significant" target audience for casinos. Scott acknowledged that bus tours to these facilities, for instance, are largely dependent on senior clientele.

"A lot of seniors are lonely, bored, isolated, seeking social entertainment. This puts them around people; they don't feel alone," Scott said. He

directs the Problem Gamblers Treatment Program, a division of the Health Association in Rochester that is funded by the state Department of Mental Health.

"The older one gets, it becomes your release if you have trauma in your life," Scott added, citing the death of a loved one as an example. "Whatever pain represents to you, the gambling can be a salve. You forget the problem."

Although the majority of gamblers bet with their head and not over it, as the saying goes, Scott said he's dealt with senior citizens who "have gambled their medicine money and lost it, and could not get their medication." He added that retirement funds and life-insurance policies become endangered when the problem becomes great enough.

These days, with several casinos less than a three-hour drive away, Scott has seen the caseload grow in his Rochester-based office as well as its branches in several surrounding counties. "The concern is very great at this stage," he said.

Problem gambling among seniors is nothing new; Scott said he's counseled people who have drained their finances playing church bingo. "By and large, they'll gamble on anything that's available, as long as it's social," he said. Yet even those who are unable to leave their homes, or choose not to, are becoming more vulnerable as well: Scott said the lure of illegal online gambling is growing among seniors.

Scott also emphasized that problem gamblers are of all age ranges, saying such people dream of hitting a big payoff but aren't necessarily fulfilled even when they win: "The satisfaction is in the action."

WARNING SIGNS OF PROBLEM GAMBLING

The New York Council on Problem Gambling Inc. says that answering "yes" to any of the following questions may indicate a problem with gambling:

- Do you experience mood swings based on winnings and losses?
- Do you neglect other responsibilities in order to concentrate on gambling activities?
- Do you experience impatience with loved ones because they're interrupting your gambling activities?
- Are you willing to eat less or go without food so you can gamble?
- Do you gamble with money designated for such necessary expenses as household supplies, groceries, medication, electricity and telephone?
- Have you ever thought about cashing in your insurance policy for gambling money?
- Are you spending your retirement funds to gamble?
- Do you fantasize about big winnings and believe you'll win back all your losses?

Scott refers people with these tendencies to his office (585/423-9490 or toll free at 877/543-7580) as well as a 24-hour help line offered by the state Council on Problem Gambling Inc. at 800/437-1611. These organizations, along with Gamblers Anonymous, address immediate concerns and also help chart a plan so that problem gamblers can find diversions without visiting the slot machines, race track or bingo hall. Scott suggests golf, attending plays and musicals, getting a part-time job, or performing volunteer service as alternatives to gambling.

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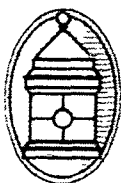
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20th Sunday (Aug. 17): (F) Proverbs 9:1-20.

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