



**Testimony of Keith Whyte
Executive Director
National Council on Problem Gambling**

**Vermont House Committee on Government Operations and Military Affairs
H. 127
February 2, 2023**

Dear Chairperson McCarthy and Members of the Committee:

I am here today to speak on behalf of the National Council on Problem Gambling (NCPG), the sole national advocate for problem gamblers and their loved ones, to provide testimony on H.127 and answer questions about creating a publicly-funded support system within the Department of Mental Health for those suffering from gambling problems. NCPG's mission is to lead state and national stakeholders in the development of comprehensive policy and programs for all those affected by problem gambling. This job is as important in Vermont as it is across the nation; there are an estimated 7 million Americans living with gambling addiction, and statistically, around 12,000 reside in Vermont. Our vision is to improve health and wellness by reducing the personal, social, and economic costs of problem gambling. NCPG is neither for nor against legalized gambling.

First, I would like to address the potential timeline that I have heard some in Vermont propose—that is, to have sports betting live in the state in the next few months. Respectfully, in order to have adequate responsible gambling programs in place that timeline as not realistic or possible. We have testified in most states across the country that have legalized sports betting and even the fastest rollouts take 6-12 months after legalization, and sometimes even longer. A hasty sports betting rollout without sufficient time and funding to build a comprehensive problem gambling program will increase the rate and severity of gambling problems that stem from the expansion of legalized gambling.

The key elements of a comprehensive program to address problem gambling are prevention, education, treatment, enforcement, responsible gambling, research and recovery, or PETERRR. They are similar in scale and scope to public health efforts to mitigate harm from substance use and abuse. While time does not permit me to address each of these elements in detail, to my knowledge, Vermont does not have more than minimal gambling addiction prevention programs in place to protect youth. Nor are there any public awareness or targeted educational efforts to reduce harm among adults who gamble. Publicly funded treatment appears to consist of one part-time clinician, and no ongoing counselor training or workforce development efforts. The Vermont Lottery does promote the National Helpline Number and provide responsible gambling support, including a contract with the Howard Center for helpline and treatment services though



usage is extremely low and the Howard Center can only transfer the call to “access and intake.” The line does not provide any support services, such as alerting the caller to the next GA meeting. We are not aware of any research to measure the baseline rate of gambling problems among Vermont citizens. There is only one Gamblers Anonymous meeting in the Green Mountain State, greatly limiting access to recovery resources. Overall, in 2021, Vermont ranked 26th in the U.S. in terms of per capita public funds invested in problem gambling services. The average per capita allocation of public funds for problem gambling services in the 42 states with publicly funded services was 40 cents; Vermont’s per capita public investment was 23 cents. This means Vermont will basically have to build a system from scratch.

These systems are critical as online sports betting is associated with higher rates of gambling problems. There are certain populations who may be particularly vulnerable to problems with sports betting, including adolescents, males, college students, athletes, veterans and active-duty personnel. Gambling problems are highly co-occurring with other disorders and are strongly associated with substance use and abuse, depression and suicidal behavior.

While the Report and Recommendations of the 2022 Sports Betting Study Committee contain extensive recommendations on responsible gambling provisions for sports betting operators, all of which appear to be incorporated in H. 127, the report and bill provide much less detail on problem gambling programs. NCPG recommends the Division of Mental Health develop a comprehensive problem gambling program, in conjunction with other agencies and stakeholders, incorporating at a minimum the aforementioned PETERRR elements. We have some additional comments.

We recommend the minimum age for sports betting be 21, not 18 as proposed in the bill. I also want to emphasize the state should maintain and manage a statewide self-exclusion list that covers all the forms of legal gambling in the state (including daily fantasy) to reduce barriers for players who wish to self-exclude.

I’d also like to address state funding for problem gambling programs. We recommend a percentage of the tax revenue from sports betting be used to fund problem gambling programs administered by the Department of Mental Health. We endorse the proposed levels in H 127 with a floor that maintains some level of funding should gambling revenue drop in a quarter. However, as discussed Vermont does not currently have a comprehensive problem gambling system and any sports betting tax revenue will not be realized for some time after sports betting goes live in the state. Since players could develop problems much sooner than that, we recommend (as they did in Massachusetts) that the state immediately provide the equivalent of one years estimated problem gambling funding in seed money to the Department of Mental Health to ensure they can begin creating problem gambling programs even before tax revenue is realized in the state.



Vermont does not have a problem gambling infrastructure in place to handle an extremely rapid expansion of sports betting. We believe that with proper funding and effective program management, Vermont can take a substantial step in creating a safe and sustainable sports gambling environment for its residents. Programs to prevent and treat gambling addiction are the most ethical and effective way to balance the costs and benefits of legalized gambling. We estimate every dollar spent saves the state government at least two dollars in criminal justice and healthcare related social costs. If you have any questions about the recommendations, or want additional details or recommendations, please do not hesitate to contact us. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.