

## **LV companies in denial about problem gambling**

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LAS VEGAS -- If a co-worker has a few too many drinks during an after-work get-together, it's common for a colleague to take his car keys away. Maybe the colleague or a supervisor would keep an eye on him for other telltale signs of alcohol abuse.

But that isn't the way it usually works with a gambling addict, panelists said at the National Center for Responsible Gaming's conference on gambling and addiction Nov. 16 at Mandalay Bay.

Although most big employers have wellness programs to address destructive behavior brought on by addictions and several gaming companies have problem gambling awareness programs to spot troubled customers, few workplace programs are in place to assist employees whose gambling is out of control.

"How do we communicate or educate our employees about these issues? The answer is: We don't," said Punam Mathur, NV Energy vice president of human resources, who spent 13 years as a senior vice president at MGM Mirage.

Although Las Vegas is the epicenter of the gaming industry, few local employee assistance programs directly address problem gambling, said Carol O'Hare, executive director of the Nevada Council on Problem Gambling.

Some experts eventually arrive at the conclusion that problem gambling is at the heart of a workplace issue, O'Hare said, but it's usually after other issues are eliminated. O'Hare said it concerns her that problem gambling isn't even on some checklists.

Although gambling is so accessible in Las Vegas — at casinos, supermarkets and convenience stores — there is no conclusive evidence that the percentage of employees suffering addictive gambling behavior is any higher than in other places, she said. But she also said because gaming is so accessible here, problem gambling should have a higher priority.

Mathur said there are several reasons problem gambling isn't addressed more in Nevada. One is that people are uncomfortable talking about losing money. Some, she said, don't like to talk about things they don't understand — and addictive behavior is an area filled with misconceptions. Others “don't want to bite the hand that feeds” them and gaming is the dominant industry in the state.

Patricia Jessie, director of gambling services and a senior clinical associate at Chicago-based Bensinger Dupont & Associates, a provider of employee assistance programs, said many companies are in denial when it's discovered some top executives are addictive gamblers. But she noted that it shouldn't be too surprising — many entrepreneurs take big risks for big rewards.

She said an executive at a Midwestern company quit his job when he got into financial trouble. No one saw the red flags of problem gambling despite the executive borrowing money, and the root of the problem wasn't discovered until a clinician asked a family member whether the man had a gambling problem.

Mathur said the public needs to know more about problem gambling before it can be addressed properly.

“What we need to do is move the needle on public awareness,” she said.

That, she said, can be done by finding high-level executives within a company who care about the issue and who can make it part of the corporate culture.

Nevada Federal Credit Union has embraced educating its employees about the dangers of problem gambling after some caring officers allowed Nevada Council on Problem Gambling posters and information to be distributed, panelists said.

Jessie said a good time to address the matter is when high-profile sporting events take place, such as the Super Bowl or March Madness. When a sport is in the spotlight, addictive gambling warning signs can be publicized and problem gambling's effect on office productivity — employees using their computers to monitor sports or betting lines or even wagering online — can be noted.

How much government should be involved in raising awareness of problem gambling was discussed Nov. 15.

William Eadington, director of UNR's Institute for the Study of Gambling and Commercial Gaming, said governments around the world have taken different approaches toward problem gambling.

Some Nevada regulators have questioned the appropriateness of allowing some technological innovations on casino floors because of fears of how they would affect compulsive gambling levels.

Regulators rejected a proposal to mount an automated teller machine on a slot machine because they feared it would be too easy for a compulsive gambler to drain a bank account. Regulators also have debated whether some games and technologies, such as mobile gaming, are more open to gambling abuse than others.

Some countries practice "soft paternalism," Eadington said. In Singapore, when casinos open next year, residents will be required to pay \$100 admission or \$2,000 for an annual pass to discourage them from gambling. The fees at least might pay to offset some of the perceived social costs of problem gambling.

And, in South Korea, Eadington said, a casino was ordered to set up a problem gambling treatment clinic — in the parking lot of the casino.

