

"Harm reduction," not abstinence, used to treat gambling addicts

Penn Live

May 13, 2007.

PENNSYLVANIA – Attendees at the Pennsylvania Health Department's first major gambling addiction conference were told that different approaches are needed to treat problem gamblers than are used with those addicted to drugs or alcohol.

Rather than requiring abstinence, a "harm reduction" theory tries to encourage problem gamblers to spend less time and money on gambling, the counselors, social workers and therapists attending the conference were told.

"Harm reduction recognizes abstinence is an ideal outcome but acknowledges alternatives," said Michael Chevalier, a consultant to Erie County's Office of Alcohol and Drug Abuse. "Are we being realistic here? Yeah. ... We can't have it be all or nothing."

More than 150 people attended the five-day conference last week in hopes of becoming certified to treat the estimated 3 percent of the population with serious gambling issues. Now that casinos are opening, counselors expect an increase in gambling addictions.

Gene Boyle, director of the state's Bureau of Drug and Alcohol Programs, said that with less than half of the state's casinos open, increased gambling problems are not yet evident.

"It'll take a couple years for all this to settle out," he said. He said he expects treatment programs to be in place by the time they are needed.

A minimum of \$1.5 million from slots revenues will be set aside annually for gambling treatment and education under the department's Bureau of Drug and Alcohol Programs. By this summer, the first funds for outpatient treatment could be released to certified gambling counselors, he said.

At least \$1 million of the annual funding from casino revenue will be used for treatment, with the rest spent on education, research and a referral phone line, Boyle said.

Bill Foreman, a mental health therapist from California, Pa., said he believes there is nothing wrong with gambling, in moderation.

"We can help that 4 to 6 percent who need it, but there's still that 94 to 96 percent who should have an opportunity to do something they enjoy," Foreman said.

Jim Aiello, executive vice president with Gateway Rehabilitation Center, advised therapists to keep their opinions on gambling in check to help problem gamblers.

"We're not talking about something like 'Reefer Madness' here. We're not closing everything down," Aiello said.

Class leaders said that nine out of 10 Americans are able to stop gambling when they have reached a preset dollar limit.

Although research estimates of gambling addiction vary, attendees were told that about 1 percent of American adults are pathological gamblers; another 2 percent have a compulsion to gamble that disrupts their lives; and 7 to 8 percent are at risk of falling into one of those categories.