

PROBLEM GAMBLING – PREVENTION PLANNING PROJECT 2023-2025

Project Purpose

Addressing the prevention of problem gambling is a Washington State priority. In early 2024, the Health Care Authority will convene a Problem Gambling Prevention Workgroup (PGPW). The workgroup's primary goal is to develop a Statewide Problem Gambling Prevention Plan that will be included in the 5-Year Statewide Prevention Plan (developed by the [State Prevention Enhancement \(SPE\) Policy Consortium](#)).

Background

Due to the rapid changes with technology over the past 10 years, online and mobile gambling has expanded worldwide at an ever-increasing pace. Over 36 states have legalized online sports betting, including our state.

Legal gambling in WA State includes commercial card rooms, Tribal casinos, the State Lottery, horseracing, charitable gaming, and legal sports wagering in Tribal casinos. And the COVID-19 pandemic brought an increase in the participation in online gambling activities, including video poker, as well as mobile and social networking games that include an element of gambling (not legal in WA State). In response to a need to expand problem gambling services, state legislation passed in 2023 that doubles the funding for the State Problem Gambling Program and initiates a program for 'year-round integrated problem gambling prevention efforts that include community engagement' ([ESSB 5634](#)). This workgroup will help HCA in the planning of future activities and goals.

What is Problem Gambling?

Problem Gambling is a behavioral health addiction that causes disruption in any major area of life, including relationships with others (family, friends, loved ones), school, or work, that can lead to negative financial, mental health, and even physical health impacts. The most serious form of the addiction is called Gambling Disorder (DSM 5). Despite the prevailing perception that gambling is less harmful than drugs because gambling doesn't affect the body, imaging studies show that [gambling activates the brain's reward system in the same way as cocaine](#). And individuals with a gambling addiction are more likely to have a co-occurring disorder (substance use disorder and/or mental health issue) than the general population. Suicidality is significantly higher among individuals diagnosed with Gambling Disorder.

What is the extent of problem gambling in WA State?

Although the majority of people can gamble without concerns, the [2021 WA State Adult Problem Gambling Prevalence Study](#) showed that, among adults who gambled:

- 3.5% would likely be diagnosed with a Gambling Disorder (1.5% of all adults)
- 17% were at an increased risk for problem gambling (7.5% of all adults)
- 11.5% gambled online (5% of all adults), despite the fact that this was not a legal activity at the time of the survey
- Individuals who gambled online at several times the risk for problem gambling compared to those who gambled in brick-and-mortar facilities and/or purchased lottery tickets

The 2021 WA State Adult Problem Gambling Prevalence Study estimates that approximately 90,000 WA adult residents are at a moderate-to-severe risk for problem gambling/Gambling Disorder. And another 400,000 adult residents are estimated to be at a lower risk for problem gambling.

Youth problem gambling in Washington State is a mental health concern

Research has shown that youth who start gambling by age 12 are at 4 times the risk of developing a gambling disorder later in life. One in eleven 8th, 10th, and 12th grade students reports gambling at least once in the past year ([Healthy Youth Survey 2021](#)). And among students who gambled, one in six reported having problems at home, school, or with friends. Research shows that youth gambling is more likely to be correlated with other risky behaviors, including alcohol consumption, smoking, and drug use. Youth are at double the risk for moderate-to-severe problem gambling than adults.

The need for publicly funded problem gambling treatment services is increasing

As sports betting, fantasy sports, e-Sports, online video gaming and poker, social network games, mobile app games and other technology-based activities have rapidly expanded, publicly funded problem gambling services have not kept pace. Except for legalized sports wagering at Tribal casinos, these activities are not legal in WA State, so they remain unregulated, untaxed, and with no required consumer protections in place. Since 2005, the State Problem Gambling Program has been providing gap treatment services for eligible individuals and family members seeking clinical treatment. However, this funding comes only from traditional gambling sources such as house-banked card rooms, the Lottery, horseracing, etc., and none from online or technology-based gambling.

Looking Forward

Why is this committee needed?

In all health fields, prevention of the problem needs to be a critical element. The Problem Gambling Prevention Workgroup will be the first ad hoc committee formed to guide the development of a new problem gambling prevention plan (to be included in the 5-Year Statewide Prevention Plan).

By 2025, the PGPW will:

- Provide guidance for the development of a new Statewide Problem Gambling Prevention Plan (with final approval by the Health Care Authority and Statewide Prevention Enhancement Consortium).
- Provide guidance and review for the development of a Problem Gambling Prevention Toolkit for prevention professionals, community organizations, and others.

Contact Information

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