

## **Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission**

### **POLICY ON GAMBLING**

**February 2006**

#### **POLICY STATEMENT**

The Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC) recognizes that the majority of Albertans gamble. A small minority of those who gamble experience a range of negative health and social consequences. The Commission works with key partners in government, the community and the gaming industry to minimize the harm associated with gambling. This is done while respecting the freedom of individuals to exercise personal responsibility in their gambling activities.

#### **CONTEXT**

1. Gambling is the act of risking money, property or something else of value on an activity with an uncertain outcome. Gambling includes not only licensed formats (e.g., casinos, bingos, VLTs, scratch tickets, horseracing) but also informal wagering (e.g., people making bets among themselves). Problem gambling is a term used to cover the individual behaviours and harmful consequences related to gambling.
2. The province of Alberta permits legalized gambling as an economic and recreational activity. Multiple organizations depend on funding provided through gambling revenues. The Government has acknowledged its responsibility to assist those who experience gambling problems and provides funding for AADAC problem gambling services.
3. Approximately 82% of adult Albertans (18 and older) gamble and about 5% experience moderate to severe problems as a result. The prevalence of problem gambling among Alberta adults is higher than in most other Canadian jurisdictions.
4. Excessive or inappropriate gambling behaviour can lead to serious health and social problems, including addiction, emotional distress, suicide, economic hardship and personal dysfunction, as well as disruption to families and communities. Researchers suggest there is a link between playing electronic games (e.g., VLTs and slots) and the development of gambling problems, but further study is needed to verify the nature and extent of this relationship.
5. Many adult problem gamblers have co-occurring substance abuse or mental health problems. As such, they require comprehensive treatment. While recognizing there are some unique differences, experience has shown that alcohol, other drug and gambling problems are amenable to similar treatment approaches.

6. Research indicates that approximately 41% of Alberta students (11 to 19 years) gamble and 9.5% show signs of gambling problems. Among Alberta youth, the prevalence of gambling and problem gambling is similar to that reported in other Canadian provinces.
7. Adolescents define gambling differently than adults. For example, they do not see informal wagering as gambling and they experience less severe financial consequences as a result of their gambling. There is some evidence linking adolescent problem gambling with increased delinquency and criminal behaviour as well as problems with family and other interpersonal relationships.
8. Both risk and protective factors for adolescent problem gambling are beginning to be identified in the research literature. These include age (i.e., as youth get older they are more likely to report gambling), peer behaviour, family history of substance abuse or gambling problems, poor connection to school and signs of school dropout.
9. In 2004-05, 4% of AADAC treatment clients (adults and youth) were admitted for gambling problems alone, and an additional 2% were admitted for gambling and alcohol or other drug problems. Most commonly, clients reported buying lottery (31%) and instant-win tickets (28%) or playing VLTs (26%) and slot machines (17%).
10. A high degree of stigma is associated with problem gambling and other addictions, and many individuals may be reluctant to seek assistance.
11. The increased availability of and access to casino gambling and video lottery terminals (VLTs) in Alberta have been a focus of public debate and concern about gambling problems. This has prompted several communities to take action in limiting or eliminating these forms of gambling. Given the continued expansion of gambling opportunities in Alberta, the potential for increased gambling problems must be closely monitored.

## **PRINCIPLES FOR ACTION**

### *Information*

AADAC will provide current and accurate information on gambling. The Commission will develop and distribute print materials and other resources that assist AADAC staff, clients and stakeholders in acquiring knowledge and understanding the issues related to gambling and problem gambling.

### *Prevention*

AADAC will encourage individuals, families and communities to avoid gambling problems by addressing both risk and protective factors. Prevention programming will include a range of actions that strengthen community capacity and emphasize individual awareness and skill development. AADAC will support individual, family and community actions that assist youth and adults in making healthy and responsible choices.

### *Treatment*

People who are negatively affected by gambling and seek treatment should have access to effective, relevant, and compassionate care that is delivered by qualified staff. A range of treatment options should be available for individuals and their families.

Problem gambling treatment will reflect research and current best practice in the addictions field. Problem gamblers should be actively involved in defining individual treatment goals and methods for achieving these goals, with referral to crisis services, aftercare and self-help groups as appropriate.

### *Joint Initiatives*

AADAC will work with the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission to develop and deliver responsible gambling initiatives in Alberta. The Commission will also collaborate with community-based agencies and other stakeholder groups to deliver cost-effective information, prevention, and treatment services for problem gambling.

Responsibility to minimize the risk of problem gambling must be shared among those who benefit from gambling activities, including the gaming industry, community organizations, and the Alberta Government.

### *Legislation and Regulation*

Alberta gambling policies should be routinely reviewed and evaluated to ensure the integrity of the gaming industry and the responsibility of Government in addressing the harm that can result from legalized gambling. Policies should reflect a balance between the legitimate interest to sustain the economic benefits of gambling, and the need to protect and promote the health and well being of society.

### *Research*

Research into the prevalence, causes, prevention and treatment of problem gambling should be conducted on an ongoing basis. The results of such research should be widely communicated to advance public and professional knowledge, inform decision-making and improve service delivery.

## **AADAC'S APPROACH**

Consistent with the above-noted principles, AADAC will deliver information, prevention and treatment services, and undertake gambling program research. The Commission will continue to act as a principal agent of Government in providing problem gambling programs, and in supporting community-based efforts aimed at minimizing the harmful consequences of gambling and problem gambling.

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