



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: May 26, 2020

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Florida's 888-ADMIT-IT Problem Gambling HelpLine Data Reveals Callers in Crisis Amid COVID-19 Pandemic

Sanford, FL: As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to reshape life as we had once known it, closures of traditional brick-and-mortar gambling facilities coupled with social distancing restrictions and requirements have resulted in dramatic shifts in gambling behaviors along with serious negative consequences as reported by contacts to Florida's 888-ADMIT-IT Problem Gambling HelpLine in March and April.

According to Jennifer Kruse, Executive Director of the Florida Council on Compulsive Gambling (FCCG), "Of particular concern with recent COVID-19 closures and quarantines, is the associated increase in problem-gambling-related risk factors that occur as a result, such as loneliness, stress, anxiety, depression, and increased use or abuse of substances. The severity of problems reported by individuals contacting the FCCG's 888-ADMIT-IT HelpLine in March and April illustrate the increased occurrence of these associated risk factors and resulting, exacerbated problem-gambling-related impacts experienced during this time."

While gambling can be a safe recreational activity for the majority of people, hundreds of thousands of Floridians suffer from gambling disorder, often with devastating impacts.¹ Current and ongoing pandemic-related financial strains from job loss, furloughs, and lost income may lead to more gambling of all types in hopes of winning money just to survive. Receiving a stimulus check may also be viewed as an unexpected "big win" for at-risk and problem or recovering gamblers. Money lost gambling can lead to financial difficulties, which can trigger associated stressors that interfere with relationships, mental, and even physical health. These experiences can leave problem gamblers and their loved ones feeling discouraged and hopeless about the future.

"When a problem gambler feels they have lost everything and sees no possibility to gain or recover, suicidal ideation and/or attempts are very real possibilities. This is unfortunately what we have seen with contacts to the 888-ADMIT-IT HelpLine in April, with more than one in five (21%), revealing current or recent suicidal feelings or thoughts due to their gambling problem," explained Kruse. "The share of callers referred to Crisis Lines in April (23%), also rose significantly by more than double, with increased levels of hopelessness and desperation reported, due to gambling-related financial and mental health repercussions brought about by the COVID-19 crisis," Kruse noted, as cause for additional concern.

If a problem gambler's first game of choice is not available, most do not just "stop gambling" because they are simply unable to do so. They instead seek to feed their addiction through any accessible and available means, even if not their typical gambling preference. Closures of traditional land-based gambling facilities had a significant impact on the primary gambling problems reported by Florida's 888-ADMIT-IT HelpLine contacts in April. "The most frequently cited primary gambling problems shifted from slot machines, cards, and table games that are most often reported, to those forms of gambling which were still accessible; Online Gambling (41%), Lottery (38%), and Sweepstakes (10%)," said Kruse.

"Of equal significance was the reported geographical location from which the HelpLine contact originated. During the month of April, for the first time ever, Seminole County tied with Miami-Dade County (16% each) as the top most frequently cited area from which the help contact originated. Alachua County was the second most frequently cited location in April, as reported by 13%, and 9% of help seekers reported their location as Hillsborough County, which is also atypical from "Pre-COVID-19" 888-ADMIT-IT HelpLine data, which consistently reflects Broward and Miami-Dade Counties as the top areas from which the contact originated," added Kruse.

The data reported during the month of April by 888-ADMIT-IT HelpLine contacts, reveals that help seekers this month were from areas all over the state and were primarily from those engaged in the forms of gambling activities still available during quarantine and social distancing restrictions, Online Gambling and the Lottery. This illustrates the effects that gambling addiction can have on any community in the state, and further highlights that those associated impacts will correlate with what gambling options are accessible or available in a particular area.

At a time of uncertainty while the whole world anxiously awaits the return to "normal life," whatever that may be, reassurance for anyone negatively impacted by a gambling problem that resources are available and accessible through Florida's 888-ADMIT-IT Problem Gambling HelpLine has never been more important. "Gambling addiction is treatable, and population-specific programs and services for gamblers and their loved ones are accessible any time of the day or night, any day of the year. The FCCG's 24-hour confidential and multilingual HelpLine may be reached by calling 888-ADMIT-IT (888-236-4848), texting (321) 978-0555,

¹ Rotunda, R. & Schell, T.L. (212). Gambling and problem gambling prevalence among adults in Florida: A 2011 replication. Research report submitted to the Florida Council on Compulsive Gambling.

emailing fccg@gamblinghelp.org, initiating a live chat at gamblinghelp.org, or by reaching out to us on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter,” concluded Kruse.

The Florida Council on Compulsive Gambling, Inc. (FCCG) is a gaming neutral not-for-profit corporation under contract with Florida State government, serving as the designated state affiliate of the National Council on Problem Gambling (NCPG). In addition to operating the 24-hour Problem Gambling HelpLine (888-ADMIT-IT), the FCCG increases awareness of problem gambling through education and outreach efforts throughout the state of Florida, advocates on behalf of the public regarding issues relating to problem gambling, and provides programs, resources, and other population specific supports to those in need of assistance.