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FCCG Annual Report Reveals Striking Impacts of COVID-19 on Those Suffering from Gambling Addiction

Sanford, FL: Today, the Florida Council on Compulsive Gambling (FCCG) released its FY 2019-2020 Annual Report of its statewide 24-hour Problem Gambling Confidential and Multilingual HelpLine (**888-ADMIT-IT**), which revealed important findings, some of which present significant implications.

During this past fiscal year (July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2020), the agency received 17,848 contacts, of which 3,153 were requesting help and/or information regarding a gambling problem. According to FCCG Executive Director Jennifer Kruse, the numbers alone don't tell the whole story. "Many Florida residents, like many Americans, are struggling given the unforeseen consequences resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. For disordered gamblers¹ and their families, the effects of the virus can exacerbate already serious financial, psychological, legal, and other problems caused by gambling," related Kruse. HelpLine data revealed significant impacts on those suffering from gambling addiction as a result of pandemic, including shifts in gambling behaviors resulting from land-based gambling operation closures and sporting event cancellations during the months of March through June 2020, coupled with a general increase in life stressors for the population at large.

As gambling operators sought to adapt to the changing landscape brought about by COVID-19 with new advertising tactics and opportunities to bet, those in recovery for problem gambling faced increasing temptations to wager money and fall back into unhealthy gambling habits, presenting a risk of relapse for these individuals. At the same time, those who may not have had a gambling problem before may have been more likely to choose betting as a psychological escape to the stressors or a relief for boredom brought about by the pandemic, putting them at risk for developing an addiction (Fineman, 2020; Pfefferbaum & North, 2020; Price, 2020; Whyte, 2020).

The primary gambling problems most often cited throughout the year were slot machines (34%), cards/table games (23%), and lottery games (14%). However, compared to the previous year's data, those citing the popular casino-operated slot machines and cards/table games as the primary gambling problem decreased by 9% (7% decrease for slot machines and a 2% decrease for cards/table games). According to Jennifer Kruse, FCCG's Executive Director, "Problem gamblers will not stop gambling just because of an inability to access their gambling preference; instead, they will supplement their gambling activity through other avenues as a means of satisfying their cravings."

This is reflected in 888-ADMIT-IT HelpLine contacts and the data reported here as well, with those citing online gambling as causing the most problems more than doubling this year to 11%, and still-accessible Lottery games (39%) surging as the most frequently cited secondary problem for those engaged in one or more gambling types. Also of note, this was the first year in FCCG history in which "Lottery point of purchase" was one of the top three ways HelpLine contacts reported learning of the number, as reported by 7%.

Data on the gamblers' primary gambling venue revealed 47% were reported to prefer gambling at land-based casinos (includes both in-state as well as out-of-state casinos), 15% at convenience stores (lottery tickets), and 12% each at racinos or at their home or a friend's home (online gambling). This data shows a 4% increase for convenience stores and a 3% increase for gambling at home, which is reflective of the shift in reported gambling preferences this year, to Lottery and online games. In April, May and June 2020, the top primary gambling location identified by callers consecutively was convenience stores, as reflected by 40%, 41% and 25% respectively. It is evident, when segregating out HelpLine data throughout different periods of the year, that these results appear to indicate a close correlation to the primary gambling location reported and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly restricted access to traditional gambling facilities throughout the last four months of the fiscal year.

Of additional concern, notes Kruse, “888-ADMIT-IT HelpLine contacts received during the final quarter of the fiscal year were markedly more severe due to compounding financial and mental health impacts, likely worsened by the pandemic.” As brief examples, the FCCG’s Peer Connect Program observed a higher rate of increase in active versus passive suicide calls, and a much higher level of depression in more than two-thirds of Peer contactsⁱⁱ. Overall, a large percentage of all gamblers represented in this study reported significant anxiety (68%) and depression (67%), with more than one in five admitting to suicidal thoughts (22%), and an appreciable number (13%) reporting neurological disorders at the time help was sought.

Data regarding the employment status of the gambler reveals that 59% were full-time employees, 13% were retired, and 17% were unemployed, disabled, or collecting workers’ compensation benefits. The average reported household income of problem gamblers this year was \$47,051, with 30% reporting the gambler earning less than \$25,000 annually, and 10% reporting income of less than \$2,500 per year. In addition, when examining data for May and June, it reveals a significant decrease in both average income and an increase in lower income households that could be attributable to job loss, furloughs, and underemployment as a result of recent COVID-19 impacts to the economy. Furthermore, 32% of the gamblers were either unemployed or receiving disability/worker’s compensation benefits in April, 17% in May, and 20% in June.

As to financial difficulties due to gambling, which included but were not limited to trouble paying bills, overextended debt, and substantial losses, 31% of respondents collectively cited these problems as the primary reasons for making contact with the HelpLine. This year, half (50%) of HelpLine contacts reported gambling-related debts, averaging \$30,715 with almost one-third (32%) reporting debts of \$25,000 or greater, 9% reporting debts of \$100,000 or more, and more than 50% of gamblers experiencing substantial credit card debt as a result of gambling. Nearly two-thirds (65%) reported the gambler bet away their savings, 50% sold or pawned possessions to pay off gambling debts or to continue gambling, and 17% filed bankruptcy at least once. Equally troubling, this year more than one-quarter (26%) of the gamblers acknowledged they were either staying with someone (e.g. friends or family) (24%) or were homeless (2%) due to financial consequences related to gambling.

The HelpLine can be accessed 365 days a year, around the clock, by calling **888-ADMIT-IT** (236-4848), starting a live chat on gamblinghelp.org, texting to 321-978-0555, emailing fccg@gamblinghelp.org, and reaching out to the FCCG on social media. “Since the pandemic’s inception, the FCCG has expanded programs and services, resource options, and access to virtual supports. We know the HelpLine is a vital service, and we know it works! The FCCG’s most recent HelpLine Evaluation Outcome study revealed that Floridians using the service continue to be overwhelmingly satisfied, see it as an important resource, would use it again, and recommend it to others. Finally, the Evaluation concluded that in response to the recommendations provided by HelpLine Specialists, gamblers showed greater improvement following the HelpLine contact, and were more likely to stop gambling altogether,” Kruse concluded.

Endnotes

ⁱ *Disordered gambling is classified by the American Psychiatric Association as a behavioral addiction and involves repeated problematic gambling behavior that causes significant problems or distress. It is also called gambling addiction or compulsive gambling. (APA, 2020).*

ⁱⁱ *The Peer Connect Program enables gamblers and loved ones to speak with a member in the gambling addiction recovering community who can provide insight about the disorder and associated impacts, offer proven strategies, assist in the development of a budget, and provide other supports and materials pending individual circumstances.*

References

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