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Campaign targets gambling addicts

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By Gary Rotstein, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

When Chris saw the ad in which a man goes into a casino and loses track of time -- forgetting all about his child's birthday party -- he endorsed it for the agency crafting Pennsylvania's first media campaign to combat problem gambling.

The 36-year-old Harrisburg resident, who has been getting compulsive gambling counseling for more than a year, recognized himself. He remembered the many hours spent at roulette tables that far surpassed his intentions or budget.

So Chris -- who did not want his last name publicized -- is glad the Pennsylvania Department of Health has begun airing ads that could reach other addicts who haven't yet figured out they need help. He notes there are plenty of commercials from casinos looking to entice people to gamble, and he was happy to give feedback on what would reach those who go too far.

"Hopefully, there will be more of a push for people to get help rather than just to go out and hit these establishments," said the man who maxed out four credit cards before calling a state hotline for help.

Chris was one of more than a dozen compulsive gamblers who assisted the Neiman Group in preparing its strategy. The Harrisburg-based ad agency created a \$1.7 million media campaign launched in late December by the health department, using a portion of funds allocated for problem gambling prevention and treatment from out of the revenue generated at the 10 casinos operating in Pennsylvania.

The campaign includes a new website (<http://www.paproblemgambling.com/>), television and radio commercials, billboards, bus shelter posters, ads in minority-targeted publications and even special ATM receipts at machines near casinos, bearing information on how to get problem gambling help.

It took more than four years after casinos began operating in Pennsylvania for the health department to roll out the campaign, a lag that drew criticism from some of those in the gambling treatment field. State officials maintained they needed to make sure a treatment system was well-established before they began widely advertising.

Now the Bureau of Drug and Alcohol Programs has contracts with about 70 different counselors certified in gambling treatment who are able to use state funds to treat those who lack their own resources, including private insurance coverage. In 2010, 135 new patients were admitted for state-reimbursed treatment, about twice as many as the year before.

That number would seem likely only to increase in 2011, considering the new awareness campaign and the volume of casino gambling. More money has been wagered -- and lost -- on slot machines in Pennsylvania each year since 2006, with the opening of new locations, and now those casinos have table games as well.

Robin Rothermel, director of state drug and alcohol programs, said the state is in a better position now to publicize and offer help than it ever has been. The \$5.7 million allocated to problem gambling programs this year is the highest of any year yet, though the health department still hasn't spent all of its funds from prior years.

There's no data, however, to indicate whether casinos have created more of a gambling problem in Pennsylvania. Counties around the state are currently doing assessments, with the state setting aside \$2.5 million to disburse to counties that want to develop their own anti-addiction efforts.

"Individuals with gambling problems were here long before casinos -- the introduction of casinos just gave people greater accessibility," Ms. Rothermel said. "I don't think we can say the introduction of casinos has created problem gamblers. I think what we're seeing is better identification of problem gamblers and better resources for those."

The new website, supplementing information people can get by phone by calling 1-877-565-2112 or 1-800-GAMBLER, makes it relatively simple for people to find help in the way of therapists or Gamblers Anonymous meetings by entering their zip code. It also offers GA's questionnaire designed to help tell if an individual has a problem.

Compulsive gambling is often referred to as the most difficult addiction to identify because there's nothing physical to signal it. People typically only admit to it once in the depths of a deep, long-hidden financial crisis.

The lack of research in the field and of prior campaigns to learn from, compared to other addictions, made it especially useful to consult problem gamblers in preparing advertising, said Amy Muntz, vice president of strategy and insights for Neiman Group.

She said the agency first talked with gamblers about the nature of their addictions, and later showed them the different options under consideration for ads. With their help, it was decided that the two TV ads running through March would show people documentary-style in the midst of their destructive behavior -- not individuals who are already in treatment or just talking about their addiction.

In addition to the ad that shows a father missing his child's birthday party, another has a man rummaging through his car for any possible cash while insisting, "I don't have a gambling problem, I have a money problem."

Ms. Muntz explained, "It allows a gambler to see themselves and say, 'Wow, that's me,' demonstrating the very real impact of their behavior. ... The folks we talked to could definitely relate to it.

Jody Bechtold, a Mt. Lebanon therapist who is treating 10 patients for gambling -- most of them covered by private insurance rather than the state -- said she's heartened that the state is finally giving more exposure to the issue.

"We're starting to mirror what some other states are doing that have been [addressing gambling problems] for a longer period of time," she said.

State officials stress that the campaign is not aimed at discouraging gambling, as studies have suggested more than 95 percent of the population can do it without becoming addicted.

That is why, for instance, the health department has not attempted to place its new messages on ATM receipts within the casinos themselves. The Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board does require the casinos to prominently display hotline numbers and other responsible gambling information.

"This is not an anti-gaming campaign," said health department spokeswoman Brandi Hunter-Davenport. "We're just trying to make sure people are aware resources are in existence if they or someone they know has an addiction to gambling."

That concept sounded good to Chris, the compulsive gambler who placed his last bet 16 months ago but acknowledged overcoming the addiction will be a lifelong battle.

"As long as people know there's a place to go or a number they can call, I think more people might get the help," he said.

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