

Before we get a Chicago casino, let's protect families from gambling addiction

Written by Administrator

Tuesday, 23 August 2022 05:00 -

If things go as planned for Bally's, which wants to build Chicago's first casino, Chicagoans will be able to gamble away their paychecks as early as next summer.

While many of our politicians tout the economic benefits to the city, there are some who share my concern that no benefit should come at the expense of families and children.

Bally's gaming application still must be approved by the Illinois Gaming Board. But under the Rhode Island-based company's plan, the doors will open on a temporary casino on the Near North Side as early as next summer. The proposed permanent casino site in River West isn't expected to open until 2026.

Most of the push-back on the temporary casino has focused on the fact that Medinah Temple was designated as a Chicago landmark in 2001, and preservationists want to make sure there is no adverse impact caused by the casino.

But I believe families and children are even more important to protect than buildings.

Last month, Illinois released a report that showed nearly 4% of Illinoisans have a gambling problem, about 383,000 people statewide. The report also showed that problem gamblers in Illinois spent, on average, \$16,750 on gambling per year; that 30% of them report gambling debt of over \$50,000; and 10% have either considered or attempted suicide. More than 50% said gambling led to them neglecting their family and kids.

It shouldn't take a brain surgeon to figure out that there are a disproportionate number of problem gamblers in poor communities. A 2021 report from the MAP Centre for Urban Health Solutions found exactly that — a higher prevalence of problem gamblers among the poor.

Supporters of Chicago's proposed casino will point to the fact that the new casino is expected to generate \$200 million in annual tax revenue for the city and transform the site into a bustling entertainment destination.

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However, a July report from the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond concluded that there is little evidence that casinos boost state taxes, and that the job gains from casino development are limited.

For years, the only places to gamble legally in the U.S. were Las Vegas and Atlantic City. But now, casinos are legal in more than 30 states, not to mention the explosion of internet gambling.

What seems to often be overlooked is the cost to families and children.

In 2004, South Florida pari-mutuel promoters promised that \$500 million could be generated for public education if they were allowed to have slot machines at venues. They got their slots, but the schools never received nearly as much money, according to reports.

Similarly, in 2012, MGM promised millions for schools in Maryland once the MGM National Harbor Casino opened in Oxon Hill. The massive hotel and casino was built, but the schools reportedly got stiffed.

More directly, an estimated 2.5 million children in the U.S. are affected by a parent's gambling addiction, which leads to an increased risk of divorce, abuse, and emotional disorders in families.

Cycles of family violence may occur alongside gambling addiction. A study conducted by the University of Nebraska Medical Center found that problem gambling is as much a risk factor for domestic violence as alcohol abuse. The gambler may abandon the family, deplete finances, or berate family members for not "supporting" or not "understanding" his or her gambling. Living with a gambling addict often is described as "living a lie" and "living a nightmare."

The impact of gambling addiction on children is devastating. Children commonly feel betrayal, depression, anger and anxiety, which results in low self-esteem or harmful behaviors — regression, self-injuring, aggression and addiction.

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I point all this out to urge our civic leaders to slow down the process on the River North Casino. While the state gaming board will be looking at logistics and security plans, they should also look at how Bally's will ensure that more people, especially poor people, are not added to our state's total of 383,000 problem gamblers. That is more important than any promise of tax revenue or jobs, especially considering the history of over-promising and under-delivering from the gaming industry.

Jeffery M. Leving is founder and president of the Law Offices of Jeffery M. Leving Ltd., and is an advocate for the rights of fathers.

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