

THE ORAL HISTORY OF CAROL O'HARE

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE NEVADA COUNCIL ON PROBLEM GAMBLING

I. INTRODUCTION

Carol O'Hare has been a crucial player in promoting the health of the Nevada community through her work in advocacy and awareness related to problem gambling for over 20 years. Since beginning her own recovery in 1991, Ms. O'Hare has served as a problem gambling consultant both to the gaming industry and the community. In 1996, Ms. O'Hare took on the role of Executive Director for the Nevada Council on Problem Gambling,¹ a position she continues to passionately serve in to this day. Through her leadership of the Council, Ms. O'Hare has helped initiate programs and services for public awareness, education, and treatment referral, as well as working with the industry on public policy and responsible gaming initiatives.

In addition to the Nevada Council, Ms. O'Hare has served on the State Advisory Committee on Problem Gambling since 2005 and the Board of the National Council on Problem Gambling since 2000. Her educative outreach has also included authoring numerous publications and speaking publically about the Council and problem gambling awareness.

Ms. O'Hare has also given her time to the William S. Boyd School of Law in particular, being a regularly featured guest speaker in the school's gaming law courses. It was in these classes the editorial board of the *UNLV Gaming Law Journal* first heard Ms. O'Hare present her story—one the board knew would be a perfect fit for this symposium on problem gambling. The *UNLV Gaming Law Journal* was ecstatic when Ms. O'Hare graciously agreed to sit down with us, and we are delighted to present Ms. O'Hare's story, in her own words, below.

II. BACKGROUND AND EARLY LIFE

Can you tell us a bit about yourself and your life growing up?

Well I am a typical Midwest girl. I was raised in Illinois, but I was actually

¹ See NEV. COUNCIL ON PROBLEM GAMBLING, <http://www.nevadacouncil.org/> (last visited Jan. 3, 2016).

born in Tokyo, Japan because my father was in the Air Force. I grew up in a home with very traditional values and had a simple life plan that included getting married and having children, and possibly a career. My father hoped that I would follow in his footsteps and go into a medical field. I didn't have a clear direction about what I wanted to do, so I opted first for marriage and having children. I spent my early adult years in Illinois as well, raising my family, until the late 1980s when we moved to Las Vegas, Nevada because, as my father said, "If you are going to be poor, be poor in the sunshine." At the time, our state was struggling economically and there weren't very many jobs, so we moved west like a lot of people who were looking for better opportunities. We knew there was a good community, good climate, and employment opportunity in Nevada because my parents had been snowbirds for a few years. So we moved to Las Vegas in 1986 simply looking for a good place to start over for the next phase of our life and raising our children.

III. THE NEVADA COUNCIL ON PROBLEM GAMBLING

Can you tell us about the Nevada Council on Problem Gambling and your role as Executive Director of the organization?

The Nevada Council on Problem Gambling is a private, nonprofit organization.² The Council was incorporated in Nevada in 1984, with a mission to generate awareness, promote education, and advocate for the treatment and support services that are needed for problem gamblers and their families.³ We are a statewide organization and the State's affiliate of the National Council on Problem Gambling.⁴ In that role, we focus our efforts on making the public aware of problem gambling as an important community health issue that is recognized as a diagnosable and treatable addiction. Everything we do is directly related to problem gambling and its impact on just about everything that goes on in our State. We work with the general community, including individuals who may be having problems, community agencies who are addressing other addictions and mental health issues, and employers and employee groups who provide opportunities to talk about problem gambling as a workplace wellness issue. And of course, we are focused on looking at the broader policy in our State: what is happening in our State, what are the perceptions in our State, and what are the policies that either inhibit us from being able to address this addiction appropriately or the policies that might encourage better services to be provided.

As Executive Director, my role is very diverse, because we work with all stakeholders, and frankly, if you're engaged in any way in the State of Nevada,

² *Who We Are*, NEV. COUNCIL ON PROBLEM GAMBLING, <http://www.nevadacouncil.org/who-we-are/> (last visited Jan. 3, 2016).

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

you're a stakeholder.⁵ Nevada has a higher prevalence rate of problem gambling than any other state in the country; it is currently estimated to be about 6% of our adult population.⁶ Those are residents; those are not people visiting on the weekend. That elevates this issue to a level of significant concern, particularly when you consider who some of the highest risk groups for problem gambling are. We have a growing senior population moving into our State for the sunshine, and seniors have some unique risk factors for problem gambling.⁷ People who have experienced other addictions and are already in recovery or are being treated for other addictions and mental health issues also have a higher risk factor for problem gambling.⁸ In fact, one study conducted by the gaming industry itself concluded that casino employees may also be at greater risk of developing a gambling addiction.⁹ Our role is to not only educate the public, but to make sure that appropriate services are being provided. And then we have to make sure that policies in the State are actually insuring the sustainability of those services over time.

So, we're busy because we basically do everything except providing direct treatment services for the people with the problem. If we succeed in our mission, we will have a culture and community that is open and receptive to problem gambling being recognized as a treatable addiction, without judgment of the people who are experiencing it. We will also have a community that is open, welcoming, and encouraging of recovery, so that people who are affected by this addiction are able to get the services and recovery they need, and in the long run, strengthen our community through the improved lives that they are able to live.

Can you tell us a little bit about some of the specific ways that you and the Nevada Council on Problem Gambling makes this information known to the community?

We do many things on many levels. In general, a great deal of what we do

⁵ See *Mission and Vision*, NEV. COUNCIL ON PROBLEM GAMBLING, <http://www.nevadacouncil.org/who-we-are/mission-vision/> (last visited Jan. 3, 2016).

⁶ *Understanding Problem Gambling*, NEV. COUNCIL ON PROBLEM GAMBLING, <http://www.nevadacouncil.org/understanding-problem-gambling/> (last visited Jan. 3, 2016).

⁷ See *Fact Sheet: Gambling Disorders and Older Adults*, NAT'L CTR FOR RESPONSIBLE GAMING, http://www.ncrg.org/sites/default/files/oec/pdfs/ncrg_fact_sheet_older_adults.pdf (last visited Feb. 12, 2016).

⁸ *Substance Abuse*, NEV. COUNCIL ON PROBLEM GAMBLING, <http://www.nevadacouncil.org/understanding-problem-gambling/impact-consequences/substance-abuse/> (last visited Jan. 3, 2016).

⁹ Howard J. Shaffer, Joni Vander Bilt & Matthew N. Hall, *Gambling, Drinking, Smoking and Other Health Risk Activities Among Casino Employees*, 36 AM. J. INDUS. MED. 365, 366–67, 369, 377 (1999) (concluding that “casino employees are at greater risk of a level 3 gambling disorder” under the South Oaks Gambling Screen scale method).

would be categorized as awareness and prevention, which takes on many forms. One of the important services that we provide is the statewide Problem Gamblers HelpLine at 1-800-522-4700.¹⁰ This is a 24-hour service that is available to anyone in Nevada and, in fact, anyone in the country.¹¹ In Nevada, we support the helpline service by ensuring that there are qualified professional call center staff trained to be able to provide direct crisis intervention services, as well as general information, to our callers.¹² The core of our work really does tie to that HelpLine because most importantly, no matter how much information we put out there to tell people about the problem, there has to be an answer for what they can do if they recognize it. Because of this, we include the helpline number in all of our educational information, and distribute that in very simple and practical ways. We are at the community health fairs handing out pamphlets, explaining how to talk to your children about gambling, and giving information on high-risk groups, suicide, and problem gambling. We provide general awareness education sessions that we can present to the community, or alternatively, we can work with community agencies and educate them and train their staff to be able to have conversations about problem gambling. This includes “Given the Chance”—our youth prevention program—or “Damage Done,” a program that allows trainers or anyone who is a health educator to be able to have a discussion with a group of people about the impact of gambling on the family.¹³

We also provide services to the gaming industry. Through the adoption of a gaming regulation in 1998, there are certain requirements that the gaming industry now has to implement programs to address problem gambling in their businesses.¹⁴ We provide them with *When the Fun Stops* brochures that they can distribute publicly so that people will know about the warning signs of problem gambling and resources for help.¹⁵ We also train gaming employees directly or provide gaming companies with our *When the Fun Stops* curriculum and train their facilitators to educate their employees about problem gambling.¹⁶ We also train others in the State, including clinical, legal, and financial professionals. It is important for them to understand how problem

¹⁰ *Get Help Now*, NEV. COUNCIL ON PROBLEM GAMBLING, <http://www.nevadacouncil.org/get-help-now/#lightbox/0/> (last visited Jan. 3, 2016).

¹¹ *See id.*

¹² *See id.*

¹³ *Awareness and Prevention*, NEV. COUNCIL ON PROBLEM GAMBLING, <http://www.nevadacouncil.org/programs-resources/public-awareness-prevention/> (last visited Jan. 3, 2016).

¹⁴ *See Nev. Gaming Reg. 5.170* (2015).

¹⁵ *Public Awareness Brochures*, NEV. COUNCIL ON PROBLEM GAMBLING, <http://www.nevadacouncil.org/responsible-gaming/public-awareness-brochures/> (last visited Jan. 3, 2016).

¹⁶ *Employee Training Program*, NEV. COUNCIL ON PROBLEM GAMBLING, <http://www.nevadacouncil.org/responsible-gaming/employee-training-program/> (last visited Jan. 3, 2016).

gambling can impact their clients or co-workers and to recognize how they can best address the issue. With clinical professionals, we provide training to meet the requirements for certification by the Nevada Board of Examiners for Alcohol, Drug and Gambling Counselors. To be a certified problem gambling counselor in Nevada, you must have 60 hours of gambling specific training in addition to your undergraduate degree in a social science field.¹⁷ The Council provides ongoing training opportunities through professional workshops and through our annual State Conference on Problem Gambling.¹⁸

At all levels, we provide information, advocate for awareness and recognition of problem gambling as a community health issue, and most importantly, advocate for people to have access to the services they need because problem gambling is 100% treatable, and we need people to understand that. We need the community to understand that this isn't about being a bad person. This isn't about being bad at math. This isn't about being greedy. This is a diagnosable and treatable mental health disorder that has actually, most recently, been recognized by the American Psychiatric Association as the first behavioral disorder to be categorized as addiction in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM 5).¹⁹ It's legitimate in the clinical world and now we have to be the advocates to tell the general public about the needs, resources and the recovery that's available for this group of people.

IV. PERSONAL STRUGGLE AND RECOVERY

In talking about your role with the Nevada Council on Problem Gambling, it is clear there is a lot of passion in your words and behind your drive in the work you do. Can you tell us, is there a particular place that passion and drive comes from?

You have to be passionate in any organization that is mission driven—that is true—and I definitely am passionate and believe in the mission of the Council. For myself, I didn't become knowledgeable of this issue through any formal education. I don't have a history of working in nonprofit organizations prior to this one or even particularly in any kind of a community context. The

¹⁷ See *Certified Problem Gambling Counselor*, NEV. ST. BOARD OF EXAMINERS FOR ALCOHOL, DRUG & GAMBLING COUNSELORS, <http://alcohol.nv.gov/Licensure/GC/CPGC/> (last visited Jan. 3, 2016).

¹⁸ *Professional Education*, NEVADA COUNSEL ON PROBLEM GAMBLING, <http://www.nevadacouncil.org/programs-resources/professional-education/> (last visited Jan. 3, 2016).

¹⁹ See CHRISTINE REILLY & NATHAN SMITH, NAT'L CENTER FOR RESPONSIBLE GAMING, THE EVOLVING DEFINITION OF PATHOLOGICAL GAMBLING IN THE DSM-5 3–5 (2013), http://www.ncrg.org/sites/default/files/uploads/docs/white_papers/ncrg_wpdsm5_may2013.pdf.

reality for me is that my passion comes from really understanding this on a personal level. As I said, I came to Las Vegas because it was a great place to move to, to raise my family in the sunshine. But I also came here with some challenges and some struggles like any young family would have, and I found that for me it was difficult to face life on life's terms when life got really tough. I got to Las Vegas and I discovered a different kind of lifestyle here, but interestingly enough, it wasn't significantly different than the Midwest. Where I'm from, if you want to take your mind off the stress of the day, to go out and have a little fun on Friday night, you might go bowling, you might go to a movie, or you might go to a friend's house for dinner. In Las Vegas, I discovered all of that was true, too, but there was also one other thing—you might go to a casino to have a little fun and gamble.

What I discovered when I came to Las Vegas was that gambling took my mind off the stress of living and when life got a little tougher than I was prepared to handle, playing video poker for an hour or two relaxed me and distracted me from the challenges I was facing. What happened gave me an insight that I never asked for, couldn't have predicted, and certainly wasn't prepared for—for me, gambling became the answer to all of my problems. I wasn't like all of those 94% of the gamblers out there who were having fun on Friday night, entertaining themselves and then going home to have a good laugh about the experience.²⁰ For me, I found that gambling did something different. When I sat down to gamble, I didn't just have fun; I just went away.

When I gambled, I discovered that I had this magic pill that allowed me to turn off whatever I was feeling and to turn on whatever fantasy I wanted to believe my life could be. When I moved to Las Vegas I was a young mother of three children in a relationship that was struggling. As life got tougher, the relationship got more difficult, and I found myself one day having to face the painful decision to end the marriage in hopes of bringing some sanity and order back into our family. I made the decision to divorce my husband, believing that when I divorced this person who had created havoc in our lives, and ended a relationship that had become very stressful and abusive, that all was going to be better. I would remove the problem from the family, and we would become that normal, happy, Midwest, Bible-belt believing, Ward-and-June-Cleaver image that I had always believed life would be. Sadly—of course in hindsight and with a lot more understanding now—I realize that was an illusion. The reality was that we had suffered a lot in those years and I wasn't equipped to take on being that same healthy, happy, Midwest housewife and mother that I thought I was going to be able to be.

After the divorce, life got even tougher—I was trying to raise my children on a minimum wage job with very little resources in Las Vegas, just a few family members and virtually no friends. The tougher it got, the more stress I

²⁰ See *Understanding Problem Gambling*, *supra* note 6 (stating that 6% of adult gamblers in Nevada are susceptible to problem gambling).

felt. And the more stress I felt, the more I needed some kind of relief. I told myself, “If I can just unwind a little bit, if I can just get through the stress, I’ll be able to go back home and solve all the problems—then everything will be ok.” But every time I felt the stress again, the only place I could go to relieve the stress was that video poker machine. And for me, it became my drug of choice. When I sat down and I dropped that first quarter in the machine, everything changed. It changed as quickly as the person who’s stressed out taking a Valium to calm down or the person who’s depressed using cocaine to perk up. Whatever mood I needed, that machine gave it to me.

Now I understand today that this happened because of specific chemical changes in my brain.²¹ I have a clear understanding that something is different about the way my brain processes that particular input, but I didn’t know that then. What I knew then was that if I gambled, something felt different. At first it felt better, then it just felt different, and eventually when I gambled I just didn’t feel anything at all. I was numb. And as life got really, really tough, I just didn’t want to feel the pain of it, so gambling became the only coping mechanism I had. Unfortunately, this coping mechanism that I was relying on was also creating more and more pain in my life.

Over the next two years, gambling became the only thing I knew how to do and my children suffered; I became the absentee parent. When I was there, I wasn’t really there. My mind was on how I was going to come up with money to cover the money I’d spent the night before. I was making up stories and lies and excuses to family members to be able to get through the financial crises that were being caused by my gambling, and all the while, they were worried and concerned about the emotional crises that were clearly affecting my life and my children. In the end, I found myself going back to that video poker machine one last time, believing somehow that if I could just numb out for a couple of hours, I would come up with some kind of solution to all the problems. By this time I was unemployed and had an eviction notice on my door. I was living under so much stress that I was basically gambling more hours than I was taking care of my family or myself, and my personal life had been reduced to a series of breaks in my gambling.

In the end, the last night I gambled, I won. And when I won that jackpot and they paid me the money, I told myself that all was going to be better and I was going to go home and everything would be wonderful because now I had the money to pay my rent, now I had the money to buy something for my children, now I had the money to buy a new outfit and go on a job interview. I created the illusion that I would solve all of my problems because now I had

²¹ See generally, *Increasing the Odds: A Series Dedicated to Understanding Gambling Disorders – Volume 6: Gambling and the Brain: Why Neuroscience Research is Vital to Gambling Research*, NAT’L CTR. FOR RESPONSIBLE GAMING, <http://www.ncrg.org/sites/default/files/oec/pdfs/ncrgmonograph6final.pdf> (last visited Feb. 12, 2016).

money. Unfortunately, within eight hours, I was sitting on my living room floor at home once again without the money, with a hundred-dollar bad check sitting in the till of my neighborhood bar, and with the absolute certainty that I'd had a nervous breakdown because everything I believed about myself I no longer believed, and the one thing I knew I most needed to do I was incapable of doing. I tried to stop gambling many times, and I had failed every single time.

At this point, I came to the conclusion that I must have had some kind of mental breakdown. I strongly believed that I no longer had the ability to get up every day of my life pretending I wasn't crazy, and putting on some kind of mask to tell the world all was okay. I rationalized that if you don't want to wake up every day for the rest of your life, knowing you're insane and unable to cover it up from the rest of the world, then the solution is to not wake up. And so, I reached my last point of desperation. I broke the last rule and value that I was hanging on to dearly, which was my belief in the sanctity of human life, particularly my own. I picked up the phone and called someone fully committed to asking for a bottle of pills so I could end my problem and hopefully leave my children in the hands of people who would be able to help them overcome the problems that I had created for everyone.

The irony of my story is that I didn't have too many friends left who would take my calls, so I called the only person that I thought would answer the phone. It was a bartender at one of the local places where I had been playing, and I was prepared to give him my grand story about how I was just struggling and "You know, I lost my job again. . .and I've got these three kids. . . and I'm just trying to be such a good mom. . . I'm so stressed out right now and just really need to unwind. . .if there's some way you can help me get some tranquilizers so I can calm down, I know I can get out there and get a job, and get back to the business of taking care of my life . . ." Of course, my real plan if I got my hands on any pills, was to take the whole bottle in one dose, and finally end this. Before I could even ask for the pills, he interrupted me and said, "You know what I think you really need to do is quit gambling." At that point, I proceeded to tell him why I thought he should keep his opinion to himself and stay out of my life. I told him, "You can't possibly understand what I'm going through, you can't possibly understand what this is like," and he interrupted me again and said, "Oh yes I can because I'm a compulsive gambler." This was January of 1991. I'd been in Las Vegas for five years and that was the first time I'd ever heard the words "compulsive gambler."

At the time, I had no idea what that meant or how that would change my life. He suggested I get out the phonebook, look up Gamblers Anonymous, and get the help that I needed. I hung up the phone not really believing that there was a solution to my problem, but I hung up the phone knowing that I had one more piece of information than I had before I made that call. I decided that I better check it out because what I really wanted when I was calling to get those pills was not to end my life—what I wanted was to end my pain, and if there

was anything out there that could help, I wanted to know about it. So I looked up the number to Gamblers Anonymous and called, and discovered there was a group of people out there that were just like me. I didn't fully understand what was happening to me because at that time I didn't know that gambling was the problem. I knew gambling cost me money—I knew that was problematic. But for me, I never viewed gambling as the problem—it was life that was my problem and gambling was the solution. The only difficulty I was having was that my solution wasn't working for me anymore.

Today, I understand that differently. I understand that what was happening to me happens to 6% of the people in this State. What was happening to me was completely the same as what happens to every alcoholic or drug addict who discovers that there's a substance out there that changes the way they feel, and who keeps using that substance in an attempt to keep changing the way they feel in hopes of somehow magically returning life to normal. Today, I understand that the very thing that I was trying to save my children from when I got that divorce is the very thing that almost killed me. When I made the important decision to end my marriage and create a better environment and life for my children, the real reason was because my ex-husband was an alcoholic and a drug addict. I made a conscious decision that I could no longer subject my children to being raised by a parent with addiction and having to suffer the effects that addiction caused in our family. Then within two and half years, without ever even knowing it, I had become him, and my children were now suffering the effects of my addiction.

So, for me, being the Executive Director of the Nevada Council on Problem Gambling is a wonderful opportunity; it's as much my personal mission as it is my career. And what makes me such a passionate advocate has nothing to do with trying to correct the circumstances that created my addiction—everybody's circumstances are unique. What makes me a passionate advocate is that I know that if we talk about the problem, then people will find their solution. What stood between me and the end of my life that day in January 1991 was purely and simply that I made a phone call to the right person. The person I called knew one more thing than I knew and they were able to point me in the direction of the next piece of information that would save my life. I believe that for everybody that has an addiction, what stands between them and the potential that the addiction will win is having that next, one piece of information that gives them a choice. My life today is about living in recovery. I am very blessed and very grateful that I was able to reach out for those resources after that phone call and have not made a bet since January 31st of 1991.

But that's not a magic cure; that's a conscious choice I get to make every day because I get to live openly in a community where I can say, "Yes I have a gambling problem, but I love Las Vegas." I get to live openly in a community where I can say, "Yes I have a gambling problem, but that doesn't make gambling bad for everybody," and I get to understand today that my addiction

is not curable, but it is manageable. Instead of spending my life in the insanity of trying to stop gambling—that's what I did for two and half years—I don't have to do that anymore. Today I have the resources and the tools to know how not to make the first bet, no matter what stress life may bring. Recovery isn't about learning how to stop gambling—it's about learning how not to start. As long as I never start, I will never have to live through the insanity that I experienced in those early years in Las Vegas. I know that recovery works. I know that people can recover with the right resources, and I know that our community is stronger when they do. And so for me, the passion is because I know that every single thing we do ultimately provides that one next piece of information that can direct someone to the help they need.

The gaming industry in Nevada has certain responsibilities when it comes to problem gambling that are prescribed by regulations. How is the Council involved in seeing these regulations come into existence, and how important are these regulations to you personally and professionally in the work that you do?

Nevada is sometimes looked at as not really having done a lot to address this issue, yet historically, Nevada was the first state to adopt a gaming regulation that actually prescribed requirements for the gaming industry. From the Council's point of view, this has been a very significant way for us to work with the gaming industry. Again, it's that stakeholder approach in that we need to identify who are the stakeholders and what's the right opportunity and method to engage with the stakeholders so that everybody is doing something that is worthwhile and relevant to what they do. For us—and myself personally—the regulation is a very clear reflection of what I believe we need to understand about the relationship between gambling addiction and the gaming industry. And it comes from my personal experience in recovery. You see, when I found that support group and when I had to reach out to people who knew a lot more about this addiction than I did, I had to listen, learn, and take the suggestions that they gave me. I had to discover a lot of important things about myself, one of which was that while I didn't go out looking for the addiction—I didn't ask to become an addict of anything—the bottom line was I had to take responsibility for the my own choices that ultimately led to the consequences of my addiction.

And so, as I worked on my own personal recovery in those early days, I had to face up to the fact that I can't blame other people for what happened to me. I have to take responsibility for my own actions. Just as if you have diabetes, you didn't ask for it. When you learn about your disease and go to the experts who can tell you how to take care of yourself, then you have to respect that information and take responsibility for changing your behaviors in order to live a healthy life. For me, I had a gambling problem. It would have been really ridiculous for me to accept the fact that what I had was a diagnosable disorder—to understand and embrace the clinical explanation for how my brain

functions—but then turn around and still blame the rest of the world because I had it. I learned very early on that if I wanted to get well, I couldn't blame my ex-husband for what he did in my life; I couldn't blame my boss because he wasn't a nicer employer; and I couldn't blame my parents. And if I couldn't blame the world for causing this to happen to me, then I sure as heck couldn't blame the gaming industry either. What I needed to do was take responsibility for the fact that I do have an illness, and I can do things differently because I understand that illness, and if I do things differently, I can be well.

And so I came into my role with the Council fully believing, as is the mission of the Council that we don't take a position for or against legal gambling because the problem doesn't reside within the casino. It doesn't reside within the poker machine. It doesn't reside within some illegal betting going on in the backyard of somebody's house. It resides in my brain and what the casino provides is the opportunity for me to activate what resides in my brain, and that's the connection. So, with that in mind, the solution for me personally, and the solution for the community cannot be focused on resentment or blame against the industry, or believing that we can solve this problem by eliminating this source of gambling. The reality is that we had to find a way to work with the industry as a legitimate stakeholder in our community and figure out what could be done positively to address this issue. It's figuring out what could be useful in that environment to a person like me who walks through the door and sits down to gamble, looking like every other gambler on the outside, but having an experience on the inside that can potentially destroy them.

When we reached out to the industry, they asked, "If there was anything we could do differently in the gaming environment that would change what was happening when Carol O'Hare was sitting at that poker machine, what would it be?" I had to go back and draw on the same thing that I found to be true in saving my life and what I believe makes the difference for everybody who has a gambling problem and needs help. The first thing they can do is talk about it. The first thing the industry could do is acknowledge the fact that this exists—it's real. It can legitimately be treated, and it is not a character defect or a by-product of what the gaming industry does as a business. Nevada Gaming Regulation 5.170 was intended to, in essence, create that credibility and that public statement that says, "Even as an industry that makes a living off of this activity, we recognize that for some people—a small percentage—there can be harm and we want to be a part of that solution."²² The components of the regulation were designed to reflect the need for that one more piece of information.

Through compliance with this regulation, the gaming industry had the opportunity to, in essence, create the largest public awareness campaign that was ever going to exist in the State of Nevada, and that's indeed what's

²² See generally Nev. Gaming Reg. 5.170 (2015).

happened as a result. Every gaming location in the State of Nevada must have the 24 hour helpline number on the wall,²³ not because every person in the casino needs to call a helpline, but because for the one or two people that might need it, not having it there could be a matter of life and death. Putting out information such as the *When the Fun Stops* brochure or something similar, says, not only does the industry recognize problem gambling is real, but they want the people who are affected by it to know what it looks like and recognize how it is different from the social gambling experience that the industry provides.²⁴ Having that information out there was a way to begin to educate not only the people who might have the problem, but also the general population of people that are coming and going through these environments who might take that information back to their family, friend or co-worker.

Then there is, of course, the employee-training component. I really believe that the employee-training component is one of the most significant values that this regulation brings because those employees are also members of our community. The gaming industry is one of the largest employers in the State. To have problem gambling talked about in their workplace is very important to changing the way the community looks at problem gambling. When your spouse comes home from work at the casino and says, "Wow, you're not going to believe what we talked about today in my new hire orientation," people pay attention. We actually know they do because since the regulation went into effect in 1999, the majority of our helpline callers indicate they got the phone number from inside a gaming location or from one of those brochures that they take when they leave. And a positive outcome from that is that over time, the people making those calls have changed from people calling about someone else's gambling problem to the majority of the callers being the affected individuals themselves. They are the people who are able to say, "I know something's wrong with me; I know gambling is causing a problem." Around 80% of the callers are people who now have enough information to know what the problem is and to say, "This could be happening to me, and there's a number I can call to learn more and get help." That's a roadmap to recovery.

Recovery is an individual process and the decision whether or not to take action to recover is completely up to the individual. The industry can't control that, the State government can't control that, and I can't control that. But the opportunity for recovery is being provided through the very locations that provide the opportunity for the alternative, which is to continue gambling and hurt themselves. On a personal level, I know that a phone call stood between me and what possibly could have been a permanent, painful decision that

²³ Reg. 5.170(2) ("Each licensee shall post or provide in conspicuous places . . . the toll-free telephone number of the National Council on Problem Gambling or a similar entity approved by the chairman of the board that provides information and referral services for problem gamblers.").

²⁴ *See id.* ("Each licensee shall post or provide in conspicuous places . . . written materials concerning the nature and symptoms of problem gambling . . .").

would have affected the rest of my family. Having that phone number on the wall and knowing that it will always be there assures me that other people will not have to be making the phone call subject to the *possibility* that the person on the other end of the phone will know something; they'll be making the phone call *knowing* that they're calling the people who do know something and can direct them to the help that they need.

Where do you hope to see problem gambling advocacy and awareness going into the future?

We've accomplished a lot in this State. I believe that the progress that we have made from where we were in 1998 has been significant. I believe that the programs, the regulation, the efforts of the Council, and the many things that we do for awareness and advocacy are all worthwhile and they are having an impact. But I also know that we have to be very careful that we don't become so comfortable with some of our past success that we lose sight of the fact that addiction is not something that you can expect to eradicate. Addiction is something that you have to address throughout time. Addiction is always going to be with us, and creating an environment that allows people who struggle with addiction to get the help they need is really what our efforts have to be about. This also includes implementing programs targeted at preventing addiction. We're never able to make the decision for people, but we know more now. We know that we can do more, earlier. We can educate people sooner. People with good information can make better decisions. It doesn't mean that they can override whatever that biological predisposition is in their head, but they may be able to be in a situation where they don't have to activate that. So prevention is important. But all of that is about organizing, coordinating, and rallying an entire community around this issue.

The Nevada Council on Problem Gambling is very unique in terms of the type of agency we are. But we are not the sole answer to the problem. The answer to the problem really lies with everyone. Some of the things that we've been able to do that should be continued and expanded include looking at the level of support that we're offering through the State of Nevada to build a true prevention and treatment system around this issue. We do a lot around substance abuse, mental health issues, and around health issues in general, but problem gambling is still just very, very much a blip on the radar screen. We've seen public policy enacted that has created better opportunities, but those policies are in their infancy. We're just now starting to understand what the next level of work might be, such as looking at expanded funding support for treatment services and then for services beyond treatment, because just providing someone with treatment and then putting them out on the street after six weeks of therapy doesn't mean that they'll be successful in recovery. We have to look at broader policies. How do we ensure that problem gamblers can access the same kinds of supportive services that someone with other kinds of addictions might need, whether that's employment services or legal services?

We've seen success with the law that was recently passed in Nevada offering treatment diversion for criminal offenders. That was an excellent collaboration with so many entities and stakeholders in the community, including the court system, judges, attorneys, and the gaming industry. But we also know that just having a law doesn't mean that it gets applied effectively or consistently. We need to do more work to educate our courts, our judges, our public defenders, and our general public that gambling might contribute to someone making decisions they wouldn't have normally made if they didn't have this addiction. If those decisions lead them to break laws to further their gambling, the diversion law now provides the opportunity to have access to treatment. Just like how we send people to DUI court or mental health court, we need people to have access to the protections and the provisions under that law.

Most importantly, we need to stop trying to figure out whose job it is to "fix this." The reality is that problem gambling affects every single person in this community, from the person with the problem, to their family members who struggle and suffer as a result of the problem, to their employers who may be impacted by the lack of productivity of individuals, to our courts, to our medical community, which is treating people with higher rates of stress-related illness because of undetected, untreated gambling problems, and to ultimately just the community at large, who will always benefit more from a person in recovery than from a person hiding an addiction.

I want to see us move forward in a way that we never stop asking the question, "What one more thing can we do?" Because if we're always looking for the one more thing we can do, while we improve upon the things we've already seen to be successful, then we will continue to move forward and be ready to meet the challenge of whatever next issue needs to be understood about this addiction. We will not eradicate problem gambling from the face of the earth, however, we can always be prepared to provide information, resources, and support for the people for whom this may yet be a part of their story. And if we do *our* job, they will be equipped to do *their* job, which is to face their addiction squarely, make the decisions they need to change the way they live their life, and to then become a part of the solution, not the problem.

Thank you Ms. O'Hare for sharing with us your story and the story of the Nevada Council on Problem Gambling very beautifully and passionately. Hopefully, in addition to our readers being able to gain insight from this conversation, perhaps we will also be able to further the Council's goal that maybe for one of our readers out there, this could be that one extra piece of information they need to confront their own struggles with addiction or help someone they know.

And thank you for giving me the opportunity to share this with you. I believe that every time we provide information someone will benefit. Even if it's perhaps just the next soon to be gaming attorney who might view that

regulation differently or that next manager in a company somewhere that will have a little more compassion for the person who has a problem. Ultimately, we never control the outcome or the result of the information we provide; we just need to be sure that we use every opportunity to provide it. So thank you very much for giving me what I believe is going to be one of the more unique opportunities to talk about problem gambling in the State of Nevada.