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Gambling hotline hears from more near Sands

Northampton County now in Top 10

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Since the Sands Casino Resort Bethlehem opened in May, an increasing number of people from Northampton County have received help through the state gambling hotline, according to monthly data from the Council on Compulsive Gambling in Pennsylvania.

It's too early to grasp the full effect of the Sands on Bethlehem and surrounding municipalities, and numbers can fluctuate. But the preliminary data seem to support research from the University at Buffalo, which suggests people who live within 10 miles of a casino face 90 percent greater odds of struggling with gambling.

"We are concerned because, considering the socio-economic status of the community surrounding the casino, we fear people will see it as a beacon of hope," said Paula Sanchez, a clinical psychologist with Allentown's Hispanic American Organization. "So proximity is a huge issue."

Thousands of people call the hotline each year, but only a fraction are reported as intakes -- callers who are counseled on how to stop gambling and told where to seek additional help. Before the Sands opening, few if any, people from Northampton were reported as intakes in the hotline data.

But the county ranked seventh statewide in May with 5 of 199 intakes; fourth in June with 11 of 196 intakes; and sixth in July with 5 of 186 intakes, the data show. The top county in May was Philadelphia, which has two nearby casinos, with 32 intakes; in June, Philadelphia, 38 intakes; and in July, Allegheny, 24 intakes.

Each month, about 20 percent of intakes do not report their county. The majority of other intakes are scattered among counties containing casinos or adjacent to counties with casinos. The top five intake counties in 2008 were Philadelphia, Allegheny, Delaware, Luzerne and Bucks.

Intakes for Lehigh County, which has ranked among the top 10, have remained relatively constant, according to the data. The county had four intakes in January, three in February, seven in March, one in April, five in May, seven in June and six in July.

1.85% APY

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A majority of people on intake report seeking help for slots, as opposed to scratch-offs, the Internet or other lottery. Intakes also cite financial problems as being the primary reason for seeking help, which, in the currently economy, does not surprise treatment providers such as Sanchez.

"If you lose your job, how are you going to feel? Depressed," Sanchez said. "And gambling and the casino is seen as an escape."

Northampton's rise in the ranks comes as no surprise to Bill S., a 70-year-old recovering compulsive gambler from Jackson Township. Bill, whose last name is being withheld as part of Gamblers Anonymous protocol, said he knows first-hand the allure of casinos.

"When you owe as much as I owed in 1972, you seek help," he said prior to speaking Thursday as part of a panel discussion on gambling at Bethlehem's Fowler Family Southside Center. "We all come from different places, but hope to reach the same end. It's going to be a struggle, and it's only going to get worse."

Bill said that when Mount Airy opened in 2007, only two or three people attended the region's Gamblers Anonymous meeting. Two years later, that number has risen to between 14 and 18 each meeting. Most of the newcomers are women and senior citizens, he said. He has yet to see increases in Bethlehem.

"It's real early, and people can hide their problems for a real long time," Bill said. "Most of us could tell you horror stories."

Even with the hotline data, the effect of the Sands on Bethlehem and the rest of the Lehigh Valley remains unclear. The statistics are very preliminary, and people's reasons for calling can vary. For example, more people could be calling because there is more awareness of the problem since Sands opened.

Community leaders agree there has not been, and likely will not be, a wave of new addicts, but that gambling will compound already existing problems in the community. Results from the University at Buffalo research, a survey of 2,613 adults in the United States in 2005, showed 10 percent of those in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods are problem gamblers, as opposed to 1 percent of those who live in least disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Sanchez said she has not seen more patients since Sands opened, though that should not be an indication of the casino's impact.

"Research has shown that gambling is a hidden addiction," Sanchez said. "It's shameful -- four to five time more so than drugs or alcohol. I'm not convinced we aren't being impacted by the Sands."

At New Bethany Ministries in Bethlehem, which provides services for needy people, workers have begun asking people on intake if gambling at the Sands has contributed to their homelessness. The Rev. William Kuntze, executive director, said a family almost never becomes homeless for just one reason, which makes tracking the impact of gambling difficult.

"Shelters in other areas of the country where casinos have started have found gambling to be a new ingredient in the mix of problems," Kuntze said. "We expect the same here...but it'll be a while until there's solid information on the Sands' impact."

Perhaps more troubling, Kuntze said, is the amount of Sands promotional material that comes into the 104 mailboxes his organization provides for homeless people without personal addresses.

"That suggests a good percentage of our homeless people are return customers at the Sands," Kuntze said, "which doesn't fit the image."

Sands spokesman Ron Reese did not return messages Wednesday and Friday seeking comment on the mailers. Sands Bethlehem President Robert DeSalvio said earlier this year that the company takes addiction seriously. All staff members at the casino are trained to help people with addiction and the casino's Web site refers people to the counseling hotline.

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