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Increased Gambling Opportunities Bring Increased Risks, Too

Since legislation went into effect last year that significantly expanded legal gambling options in Illinois, video gaming machines have become common in restaurants, bars, and truck stops, and online sports betting has skyrocketed. This increase is accompanied by many advertisements for online betting, especially in commercial breaks during sporting events.

With increased exposure to gambling opportunities, there is also increased risk for gambling disorders, whether as new problems or as a reemergence of old patterns. Additionally, the increased availability of wagering options could likely be a trigger for those who have been working hard to avoid gambling altogether.

Similar to drug or alcohol use disorders, problem gambling can affect anyone. Like other addictions, problem gambling often begins gradually. Many forms of gambling are legal, and so difficulties often go unnoticed until the individual affected has suffered significant financial and social hardships.

People rarely begin gambling with the idea that it will become a serious problem. The road to problem gambling often can be subtle. Because it can go unnoticed in its beginning stages, an awareness of the warning signs is important. These include: hiding gambling or keeping it a secret, intrusive thoughts or a general preoccupation with placing bets or gambling, placing new bets to try and regain money or losses from past bets, significant debt associated with gambling, or negative effects on personal relationships.

March is Problem Gambling Awareness Month, a national observance that raises awareness of these risks, while also sharing available resources to support individuals and their families who are adversely affected by problem gambling. The Illinois Department of Human Services is supporting a statewide gambling awareness campaign, and also provides funding for community agencies to provide screenings and treatment for gambling disorders year-round.

With support from IDHS, three organizations in Metro East—TASC, Chestnut Health Systems and Gateway Foundation—provide outreach, screening, referrals, and treatment for gambling disorders. There are also a number of locations in Illinois that provide access to voluntary self-exclusion, meaning that individuals can exclude themselves from entering any Illinois casino.

Together we are committed to sharing free and confidential resources, including a gambling hotline that can be reached three ways: phone: 1-800-GAMBLER (1-800-426-2537); text (ILGAMB to 53342), or web: www.weknowthefeeling.org. Additional resources are available from the National Council on Problem Gambling (NCPG) including selected resources for Illinois.

March is Problem Gambling Awareness Month, but struggles with problem gambling happen throughout the year. If you or someone you know could benefit from support in addressing issues related to problem gambling, please reach out or share this information.

