

GAMBLING INFORMATION #4

A public health approach to gambling

To reduce harm from poker machines, a comprehensive public health approach to gambling is necessary.

Gambling can cause mental, social, emotional and physical health problems and as such is a major public health issue.

A public health approach to gambling considers the impact of gambling on the entire community and on all gamblers, not just 'problem gamblers'. It also focuses on prevention, rather than treatment alone.

Government at all levels should take responsibility to reduce the harm caused by EGMs by involving a range of policies. The harms from gambling are felt at various community levels, as shown below¹:

Individual	mental health issues including stress, depression, anxiety and suicide, job loss, financial hardship, loss of social supports and community connections
Family and friends	family neglect, domestic violence, relationship breakdown, poverty, homelessness, stigma and social isolation
Workplaces, clubs, groups	absenteeism, job loss, poor performance, theft, lower participation rates in sports and social clubs
Community	reduced resources available, increased reliance on welfare supports, community disempowerment, loss of focus on core business for clubs that run venues, poverty
Society	less employment created by spending in the gaming industry, regressive tax, loss of confidence in government due to perceived conflict of interest, increased crime and associated costs

¹ North East PCP 2009 Health Promotion Resource Guide for Problem Gambling in Melbourne's North

This information page was developed by the Local Government Working Group on Gambling (LWGOG) which comprises of a group of local government professionals sponsored by the Victorian Local Government Association (VLGA).

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Self-responsibility versus a broader determinants approach

The gambling industry and the Victorian Government take an approach to gambling policy which focuses only on the 'pathologised' individual.

This approach focuses on the consumer and reactive treatment for problem gambling but ignores problems such as the design of machines. This approach minimises the responsibility of the gambling industry and governments and does not prevent gambling harm.

In reality, the individual characteristics of the gambler are only *one part* of the problem and social and economic environments play a significant role in problematic gambling.



Problem gambling and health

There is a correlation between problem gambling and smoking, risky drinking, drug use, mental illness – especially anxiety and depression – family violence, diabetes, lung conditions, obesity, and disabilities affecting everyday life.² Therefore, reducing problem gambling is likely to improve community health generally.

² Department of Justice 2009 *A Study of Gambling in Victoria – Problem Gambling from a Public Health Perspective*

What can local governments do?

The collective harm from gambling is a significant public health issue felt at the local level, and while local governments have limited capacity, there are still many things that local governments can do to reduce these harms.

A comprehensive public health approach to gambling includes:

- limiting the accessibility of gambling opportunities especially in vulnerable communities
- advocating for consumer safety measures and technological interventions that make EGMs a safer form of entertainment (see *Advocacy for poker machine reform* factsheet)
- ensuring adherence to prohibitions on dangerous marketing such as promotions involving children, free food and drink, loyalty cards or rewards for gambling expenditure
- the provision of, and support for, community services and activities that build social capital and provide alternatives to gambling for community members to prevent problem gambling occurrence
- increased information to community groups and individuals on how EGMs work, how they pay out and how much they can cost per hour to play.

Why should local government advocate for a public health approach to gambling?

- Problem gambling places a direct burden on local government.
- Problem gambling detracts from the physical and mental health of individuals and their families and undermines local government attempts to improve community wellbeing.
- EGMs are unsafe products and councils should advocate for greater consumer protection.
- Gambling hurts local economies and small businesses by taking money from retail, hospitality and other sectors.
- In Victoria, EGM venues are clustered in the most disadvantaged communities.
- Industry stakeholders are a powerful lobby group. The gaming industry is able to place enormous pressure on the Australian and Victorian Governments. Local government can provide an alternate voice.

How will communities benefit from this approach?

- improved public health, community wellbeing and consumer safety
- a reduction in problem gambling.

Key messages	Recommendations
Problem gambling from EGMs is a public health issue requiring a range of responses from governments at all levels.	Advocate to the Australian and Victorian Governments to move away from the self-responsibility model of gambling regulation and towards a public health approach that commits to harm minimisation measures to prevent problem gambling and increased consumer safety
All local governments should have a strong policy framework which supports advocacy and empowers them to respond to applications.	Ensure your local government's policy framework, including social policy and planning scheme is up to date and clear and strong on the issue of gambling

Gambler's Help Services

Gambler's Help

- This is a 24 hour phone counselling service. The website has some self-help tools.
- 1800 858 858
- www.problemgambling.vic.gov.au

Gambling Help Online

- This provides free, online counselling by trained staff, including live counselling and email support. The website also has self-help tools.
- www.gamblinghelponline.org.au
- Gambler's Help service programs are funded through the Community Support Fund and were established with the introduction of gaming machines in Victoria.

Metropolitan services

Region	Gambler's Help service	Phone
Eastern metropolitan suburbs	EACH http://www.each.com.au/gamblers-help-eastern/	1300 131 973
Inner metropolitan suburbs	The Salvation Army	(03) 9653 3250
Northern metropolitan suburbs	Banyule Community Health	1300 133 445
Southern metropolitan suburbs	Bentleigh Bayside Community Health http://www.ghsouthern.org.au/	(03) 9575 5353
Western metropolitan suburbs	https://www.ipchealth.com.au/	(03) 9296 1234

Victorian Commission for Gambling and Liquor Regulation (VCGLR)

- 49 Elizabeth Street, North Richmond, VIC 3121
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- contact@vcglr.vic.gov.au
- <http://www.vcglr.vic.gov.au>