Op-Ed/Editorials – Strength Through Balance: The Importance of Councils on Problem Gambling

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The Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling's founder and long-time executive director, Thomas N. Cummings, worked with great energy in the early 80's to advocate for services to address problem gambling. In his appeals to Massachusetts Legislators and other public officials, he would often describe the services he was seeking as analogous to a three-legged stool. In order for problem gamblers to be helped, he would say, a three pronged approach was needed: (1) treatment for those looking for help in breaking the hold that gambling had on them, (2) research to learn more about this disorder, and (3) an advocacy group such as the Council to provide information and connections between problem gamblers and the resources for help. These three "legs" would provide the structure and stability to the "stool" that would make it effective and strong enough to achieve the purpose for which it was created. Providing one or two of the legs only would not be sufficient.

In my eighteen years at the Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling, I have come to recognize the wisdom in Tom's vision of how to help people with gambling problems. It is the importance of that vision that I would like to address here.

While councils on problem gambling may vary from state to state and country to country in structure, governance, and funding, there are some common elements that most include in their mission. In some form, advocacy, education, public awareness, and referral are part of the continuum of services most councils offer.

The advocacy role is primary in some ways since without advocacy for comprehensive services for those affected by gambling problems there would be no opportunity to meet other needs. In addition, advocating for responsible public policy related to gambling in states, provinces, and countries often results in greater commitment of jurisdictions to providing resources to address the unintended negative consequences of state-sponsored gambling.

The educational role of councils is varied. The benefits of training the community and professionals – all those who meet up with the effects of problem gambling in their daily work – cannot be underestimated. The worlds of medicine and mental health, corrections, domestic violence, suicide prevention, other human services, K – 12 education, higher education, finance are all enabled to deliver their services more effectively by understanding problem gambling's impact on their work.

Public awareness activities of councils serve to alert the general public that problem gambling is an identifiable disorder, that there is hope for getting better, and that there are resources for help. The goal of public awareness is to provide information in order to empower those facing desperation because of their or their family member's disordered gambling to make some changes to reverse the situation. Public awareness campaigns that reduce the stigma associated with gambling problems and with seeking help have the potential to change attitudes and behaviors as well as public policy.

The most direct contact that people suffering from gambling disorders have with councils is through their helplines. These information and referral services are crucial in providing the understanding and the resources callers seek. Helpline specialists' empathic listening, as they offer information and referral, aims to empower callers to take the next step to change their situations for the better.
Because of the work of the councils, some significant improvements have resulted for those facing gambling problems. Yet challenges exist. In addition to coming up with some solutions to the perennial search for stable funding mechanisms, councils could achieve their goals more effectively by shifting some focus from training to systems change and committing to creating and implementing means of measuring whether programs achieve what they intend to accomplish.

While recognizing the important work that councils do, the need for the other legs of the stool is clear. Without research there would be limited scientific knowledge

about gambling disorders to inform treatment and advocacy efforts. Without problem gambling treatment, those suffering most acutely from disordered gambling would not have access to the care they seek. And without advocacy groups, it is possible that the situation would look much like it did prior to the 1980's…with a paucity of awareness of this disorder and resources for help – with only a handful of human services and other professionals confident of their ability to recognize and refer or treat problem gambling, with minimal attention paid to public policy related to gambling, and no easily accessible way for someone seeking help to find it.

What do you think? You can address comments to Kathleen Scanlan.