

Reducing poker machine numbers is not window dressing, it's a beginning.



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Recent comments by people with a stake in gambling have suggested that reducing the number of poker machines in South Australia will do nothing to combat problem gambling. They have even gone so far as to suggest that the government's proposal to cut 3000 machines from hotels is nothing more than window dressing.

As an organisation that works with people who are severely affected by the fallout from gambling, UnitingCare Wesley* believes that any reduction in poker machines numbers, combined with other harm reduction measures being introduced, will be a positive step forward.

This belief is supported by clear evidence, from the numerous programs we run and from the 2003 report by the Independent Gambling Authority. We should not allow profits for a few to be put ahead of a decent life for many.

The burden placed on men, women and children, services and the public purse has increased dramatically since the introduction of poker machines into hotels around this state. A reduction in machines will help to reduce the burden.

The figures speak for themselves:

- There are 23,000 problem gamblers in South Australia
- There are over 15,000 poker machine licences
- Every problem gambler adversely affects at least 7 other people, including children
- Since their introduction in June 1994, poker machines have accounted for the entire \$5 billion increase in annual gambling revenue
- Over 40% of poker machine revenue comes from people with gambling problems

How can anyone argue that reducing the number of poker machines will not benefit South Australia and help reduce gambling problems?

It can affect anyone and, in turn, affects everyone

One of the consequences of problem gambling is children going without food. Others include bankruptcy, homelessness, domestic violence, crime, alcohol and drug abuse, depression and other associated health problems.

We know that amongst people with a gambling problem up to 20% have considered or attempted suicide, with gambling mentioned as a significant factor. 30% end up facing criminal charges, and up to 70% steal to support their gambling addiction. This includes those who steal from family and friends, which are crimes that are not often reported.

The consequences of problem gambling spread from the gambler through their family and into the workplaces and communities they are a part of. They tear at the fabric of our society, putting intense strain on personal relationships, businesses, community services and the court system. They also lead to a significant breakdown of trust in personal relationships.

Think of the benefits that would flow to South Australia if the number of problem gamblers was reduced and the money that is required to support them could be channeled back into schools, hospitals and generating jobs for our children.

Caring is not just about picking up the pieces

UnitingCare Wesley provides assistance to people who are significantly affected by gambling problems. We see first hand the results of problem gambling, and the services and programs provided through our agencies in Adelaide, Port Adelaide, Bowden and Port Pirie have helped literally thousands of people who have been affected by it.

Simply helping, however, is not enough. We don't believe that we should be just 'picking up the pieces'.

What is the point of providing Break Even counselling services, assistance to the homeless, domestic violence counselling, health services and mental health assistance if we don't try and get to the causes and do something about changing them?

If you get to the cause, you help stop the on-flow of other problems, which means that those resources can then be better utilised in other areas, such as youth health and multicultural services.

There are enough problems in our society without actively creating more.

What can be done?

Help to reduce the number of poker machines by contacting your local member of parliament and supporting the proposed legislation.

You may feel that you're just one voice, but many voices together will raise a cry that cannot be ignored.

In our submission to the Independent Gambling Authority, UnitingCare Wesley argued that accessibility to poker machines needs to be substantially reduced by halving the number of venues and the number of machines. The proposed reduction of poker machines by 3000 is a good beginning, but more can and must be done. Consideration needs to be given to restricting the serving of alcohol in – and the removal of Automatic Change Machines from – these venues, more early intervention strategies, and the abolition of loyalty programs and inducements that are provided to keep people gambling.

This is not something we feel that we can be silent about, but at the same time it is not something that can be done alone. The greater the individual and community concern, the more likely that steps will be taken to remedy the problem.

Ignoring it will not make problem gambling go away.

Gambling and related services provided by UnitingCare Wesley

If you or someone you know has a problem with gambling, assistance can be provided through UnitingCare Wesley Break Even services in Adelaide on 8202 5180, Bowden on 8245 7100 or Port Pirie on 8633 8600.

You can also contact the Gambling Helpline on 1800 060 757.

Would you like to do more?

If you would like to make a donation to assist UnitingCare Wesley in our ongoing work please contact your local UnitingCare Wesley or visit our website. We'd be delighted to hear from you.

* Formerly – Adelaide Central Mission, Port Adelaide Central Mission, Wesley Uniting Mission and Port Pirie Central Mission



Together we can reduce the harm of problem gambling.

www.ucwadel.org.au