



## Cultural Communities Symposium on Problem Gambling and Mental Health



# Cultural Communities Symposium on Problem Gambling and Mental Health

**On March 25, approximately 50 people — representing the African American, Chinese, Hmong, Laotian, Nigerian and Vietnamese communities — gathered at Wilder Center Auditorium to learn about the impacts of problem gambling and mental health in their respective communities.** The purpose of the program was to provide basic information about gambling addiction and its relationship to other addictions and mental health. Additionally, there was specific interest in how to start conversations about these issues across generations. Many of these communities have experienced historic trauma and challenges assimilating into Minnesota's predominant white culture. Traditional talk therapy is not an easily acceptable model for care in communities that value their privacy.

The program opened with a presentation by Sam Vitiello, Director of Recovery Services, Wilder Community Mental Health & Wellness clinic. Sam engaged the group by explaining how brain development in youth and teens makes them particularly vulnerable to behaviors that could develop into addictions: gambling, gaming, vaping, drug and alcohol use. It's critical to keep the lines of communication open between parents and children. Parents need to

know the resources available to them to minimize harm and to understand why their children are experimenting with substances or spending too many hours gaming or gambling. While parents may decide to limit access, there may be underlying issues that need to be identified and addressed. Elders in the community expressed a need for scripts to help them initiate such conversations. Younger community members expressed frustration that it was often difficult to have open conversations with their elders.

The second part of the program included presentations from each of the groups receiving grants from the Department of Human Services (DHS) to expand problem gambling awareness. Asian Media Access, Lao Center of Minnesota, Neighborhood Youth Academy and Progressive Individual Resources all shared aspects of the work they have been conducting to increase their communities' awareness. Each community received assistance from Russell Herder, a Minneapolis ad agency that also receives funding from DHS, to bring specific community messaging into visual works for websites, posters, flyers, etc. Each campaign consists of tailored elements which speak directly to each community. For example, Neighborhood Youth Academy works with young Black teen athletes. In addition to

their focus on academic achievement, these teens are excellent athletes with goals to play Division I basketball. A two-minute video speaks of the importance of staying on track and avoiding the risks that could jeopardize their receiving scholarships in the future. The video also emphasizes the positive message to invest in oneself, to hone one's skills and to stay away from gambling, as it can keep them from achieving their dreams.

The group also gathered for an open discussion in which attendees asked clarifying questions, expressed a desire to continue learning more and wanted to know how to obtain more tangible help, such as how to have a conversation about difficult topics like gambling and addiction.

Each community needs to drive the change they want to see. MNAPG will continue to be a resource and offer approaches to change, but the real work lies within each community to grow its awareness to this addiction. Stigma and privacy are significant issues that must be addressed. Creating new spaces and offering activities in which community members can gather for socializing will be important alternatives to having casinos as the only place to go. Changing attitudes and behaviors will be challenging.



Susan Sheridan Tucker  
Executive Director  
MNAPG

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FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

## Springing Ahead

Spring has sprung? Mother Nature tested our mettle this year with a seemingly endless winter, and I for one am glad the calendar has turned to May.

MNAPG spent much of late winter working on sports betting issues. The Super Bowl and March Madness, along with the national spread of sports betting, kept us busy monitoring sports gambling and creating gambling addiction awareness messaging. For the past few years, we've created social media posts, *Star Tribune* digital ads and emails to three specific audiences: those who may be dealing with gambling addiction, concerned loved ones of problem gamblers and healthcare influencers. Each required tailored messaging to ensure that readers were aware of available resources and what MNAPG is doing to increase Minnesotans' understanding and empathy towards this insidious addiction.

We are beginning to assess the results of these varied campaigns and are encouraged that our outreach is expanding, with more people tapping into the resources we offer. We saw a surge in the number of people who chose to take our survey (available on our website) to see how their gambling compares with other Minnesotans and where they stand on the problem gambling spectrum. Survey participants are asked to answer a number of questions about their behaviors and attitudes towards gambling and receive a short report after taking the survey. Depending on their score, specific recommendations are suggested should the person seek to minimize the harms they're experiencing with excess gambling. The survey can be found here: <https://mnapg.evolutionhealth.care/cyg-u>.

We also noted that many of our website visitors during March were young men (aged 18 to 35). This came as no surprise. Our 2019 positive play survey and the NGAGE surveys indicated that this age group was the most likely to develop issues with gambling, specifically sports betting. While Minnesota has not yet passed a sports betting bill, MNAPG will work to ensure that prevention messaging for this cohort is included.

As an additional nod to Mother Nature's fickleness, our annual conference this year will take place on September 18 at the Hilton West in Bloomington. September is typically a decent traveling month so our invited speakers and attendees shouldn't have weather as an issue. Please **SAVE THE DATE!** As I write this, we are working to finalize our speaker list, which includes an exciting line-up. We will share more details in the coming months.

Happy Spring!

Susan Sheridan Tucker

Minnesota Alliance on Problem Gambling is a nonprofit agency whose mission is to help those affected by problem gambling in Minnesota. We do this by promoting awareness and understanding of the issue via our website, newsletter, community education programs, sponsorship of the Minnesota State Conference of Problem Gambling, and training of professionals in preventing and treating problem gambling.

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# 20th Anniversary of PGAM (Problem Gambling Awareness Month)

**This March marked the twentieth anniversary of PGAM.** The month of March was intentionally chosen by the National Council on Problem Gambling (NCPG) to draw attention to the growing interest and participation in “the brackets,” the NCAA basketball championship tournament.

For many Americans, the annual tournament is a fun event involving officemates and friends choosing which teams will move forward in the competition. Many such pools don't involve money, but only bragging rights for the winner. However, for others, it's a much more serious and potentially harm-producing endeavor. Aided by easy accessibility of wagering on a phone, players could engage in in-play bets (that have nothing to do with the outcome of the game) in addition to picking winners. Some argue that placing a small wager on the games makes it more exciting. But for others who get swept up in the action and bet more than they can afford to lose, the experience of wagering can be devastating.

This year may have been more damaging than previous years as none of the first-seed teams made it to the Final Four.

Some facts about March Madness (sources in parentheses):

- Over 80 million brackets are completed each year (American Gaming Association)
- An estimated \$15.5 billion was wagered over the course of the tournament (American Gaming Association)
- Approximately 52% of wagers were placed online (American Gaming Association)
- Of those betting online, an estimated 75% were betting on the tournament for the first time (American Gaming Association)
- The odds of filling out a perfect bracket is one in 9.2 quintillion (NCAA)
- More than 62% of Americans either planned to place a wager or knew someone who did (American Gaming Association)

Concerns were raised over student athletes being harassed on social media by those who lost bets. This will need to be closely monitored in the months to come.

## MNAPG HELPS TO GET THE WORD OUT ABOUT PGAM

As the state affiliate to NCPG, we join forces in the national PGAM campaign to increase awareness about problem gambling throughout the state of Minnesota. Our activities actually start around the time of the Super Bowl and then roll into March, ending at the conclusion of the NCAA championship in early April. Our campaigns are displayed on our social media platforms, included in our long-standing relationship with *The Phoenix Spirit* (recovery newspaper and website focusing on addiction, recovery, renewal and growth) and highlighted in various digital ads, targeted emails and paid articles with the *Star Tribune*. We also participate in several conferences throughout March by either providing resources or making presentations.

One of MNAPG's presentations addressed Metro State's Problem Gambling elective class, which, through the tenacity of counselor and associate professor Kevin Spading, has received recognition by the Department of Human Services as equivalent to the 60 hours of training required to become a problem gambling counselor. This enables all graduates of this LADC program who have taken this class to be immediately eligible to complete a contract to be a certified with Minnesota's Department of Human Services, and thus offer free problem gambling services. As this is the only program of its kind in the state, MNAPG is hopeful this will lead to a new pipeline of problem gambling counselors, something which is greatly needed.

MNAPG also had the opportunity to address the Hazelden Betty Ford community regarding the high co-occurrence of gambling with other addictions and mental health issues. This was a new audience, with hundreds attending from across the country.

MNAPG relies on targeting three specific audiences in our PGAM campaigns: gamblers, a gambler's concerned others and healthcare professionals. We emphasize the resources available for help and provide hope in our messaging that treatment works for gamblers and their families. For healthcare professionals, we stress the importance of screening for problem gambling and to make them aware of available resources. Examples of our campaign are displayed here.

**Gambling addiction is real.**  
So is recovery.

Learn More



**Gambling addiction is real.**  
It's time to treat it that way.

Learn How



**Betting on the Championship Games?**

Bet responsibly to keep it fun.



**The big college basketball games are here.** For many, making a friendly wager on the outcome of the game adds to the excitement. For some, however, the wagering may take on a life of its own, especially when betting on your phone and making “in-play” wagers.

Learn More About Problem Gambling Here

Digital, social and email advertising



# In Their Own Words

## Laura's Story

**"It's truly okay to ask for help. I'm not alone anymore."**

**The first time I gambled, when I was 18, I considered it simply entertainment.** I might spend \$20-\$40 and go with some friends. It never occurred to me that gambling could become a debilitating addiction.

However, while I was in college, the impact of several events unsettled me. First, my mother's longtime partner left her, leaving emotional wounds for all of us to deal with. And not long after that, I learned that a young girl who I had mentored died by suicide. I tried to focus and managed to graduate, but I never had a chance to truly grieve these losses while in school.

After graduating, I eventually moved back to Minnesota in 2017 and got engaged. That's when I started to explore gambling. By the time I got married in July of 2018, I was living a double life with gambling. I remember telling my husband at the time that I felt more married to slot machines than to him.

I had been looking forward to marriage and the opportunity to be part of his family, as I was adopted and longed to be loved and experience a sense of belonging. Unfortunately, although I initially felt accepted by my husband's family in the beginning, I eventually found it hard to be myself.

All of these struggles — rejection, abandonment, not feeling I belonged or was loved — drove me to gamble as an escape. Gambling offered a "fake happy place" for me to numb my pain and just be. I felt emotions on the outside but had deep pain inside myself. When I gambled, it felt fun, but as time progressed, I was exhausted. I felt like a robot with an altered mind and body.

At first, I gambled for just a few hours. But before long, I was gambling for longer periods of time, spending \$300-\$500 two to three times a month. Things progressed

quickly. Within a year, I was losing \$1,000-\$2,000 two to three times a week.

I would drive to Mystic Lake no matter what the weather was like. As I drove, I'd constantly hear a voice telling me that everything would be fine — but it was hard to numb that voice.

My gambling escalated even more. I spent a lot of my inheritance from my grandparents, approximately half a million dollars in two years.

My health started going downhill. I stopped taking important medications and stopped eating, losing 30 pounds over two years. I let go and didn't care, as if I wanted to die that way.

Well into my addiction my morals became very foggy and distorted. My socializing with friends became more isolating. I lied, I stole from my fiancé, used my inheritance and other forms of getting money (annuities, life insurance), and sold my most prized possessions. In the end, the last things I sold were my flute from childhood and a camera my grandma had bought me. I was desperate and needed money, it was my fix.

I lost my job in December 2019 and had a mental breakdown on January 2, 2020. I knew I wanted to get help and be in a safe place. My mom grabbed my childhood blanket and bear to help comfort me. I told her to take me to the ER. I had suicidal thoughts. I was done living.

I told my mother all about my gambling. She said my eyes were a different color during my breakdown and wanted to protect me from the kitchen knives. Eventually, she got me to a safe place, the hospital. I ended up celebrating my 33rd birthday in the hospital, and my mom, aunt and husband came to celebrate. I never thought I'd be where I was, but I needed to feel safe and heard in a protected environment.

It was during my hospital stay that we found a program for inpatient care for gambling addiction, the Vanguard Center at Project Turnabout in Granite Falls. I went there shortly after leaving the hospital. It was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life.

As we drove, I noticed an eagle flying next to the car. For me, it was a symbol of a higher power. I know that a "higher power" can push some people away, but for me it's about nature.

At Vanguard, I learned a lot about addiction in general but also gambling addiction. I related to the 20 questions in the GA yellow combo book and, more and more, realized I did have a gambling problem.

Being in treatment for five weeks, I learned that gambling addiction doesn't define me, even if it happened in my life. I learned more about how much more pain I had endured in life and its impact on my self-esteem and self-confidence. In treatment, I have a relapse prevention plan, and support has helped me continue to make my recovery number one. I learned how to advocate for myself and what I need, knowing my toolbox of coping skills when things get overwhelming and learning to be kind and gentle to my new self. Recovery is challenging but I tell myself I do the best I can do in that day and give myself credit. It's truly okay to ask for help. I'm not alone anymore.

Sharing my story is part of the healing I do every day, part of my recovery. I hope that sharing my story can help others and be a reminder that there is help out there.

# A Seat at the Table

**Until recently, the Minnesota Suicide Prevention Taskforce, implemented in 2015 to address the steady increase in death by suicide in Minnesota, lacked representation from the gambling addiction field. But that changed in 2022, when Sonja Mertz, MNAPG community educator, joined the taskforce.**

The 2015-2023 Minnesota State Suicide Prevention Plan was based on the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention and the premise that suicides are preventable, mental illness is treatable and recovery is possible. While the plan aimed to be comprehensive in its public health approach of promoting health and wellness in our communities, the topic of gambling addiction and the high number of suicides by those suffering from gambling problems was not addressed or even mentioned.

The lack of inclusion of gambling in the suicide prevention plan seemed a glaring

omission, and after discussion with Susan Sheridan Tucker, MNAPG executive director, and Kelly Felton, Minnesota suicide prevention coordinator, it was agreed that MNAPG would take a seat on the taskforce. The Minnesota Suicide Prevention Taskforce meets on a bimonthly basis and collaborates with the Department of Health to develop, implement and evaluate the state plan. At the February meeting, it was announced that the new 2023-2027 State Suicide Prevention Plan was finished and had been sent to the Commissioner of Health for a final signature.

Findings from both community engagement feedback, and mortality and morbidity data were used to identify and prioritize efforts for the new state plan. Priority populations for focus of suicide prevention efforts include youth (ages 10-24), LGBTQ+ communities, Black/African Americans, American Indians, middle-aged males, veterans and people with disabilities. As strategies are created and implemented,

including those used by the Minnesota suicide prevention community grantees, MNAPG will work to ensure that language regarding gambling behavior, gambling risks and gambling addiction are considered and included.

Sonja is also a member of the Data Action Team whose purpose is to guide the implementation of the data-related goals and objectives of the state plan. This team analyzes current data sources, including suicide trends, mortality reports, student survey results and community data. Most recently, the committee looked at adult risk and protective factors and how those factors can assist in addressing the mental health needs of communities and populations. Sonja will continue to provide updates on how the topic of gambling addiction is being incorporated into data collection and analysis.

## 1-800-GAMBLER, The New National Helpline



**Years in the making, NCPG has recently leased 1-800-GAMBLER as the new nationwide helpline number.** With the significant increase in sports betting, it makes sense to use one number in the often-small amount of advertising space. While some states mandate that their own state helpline be included in any advertising that crosses their borders, Minnesota does not mandate the

exclusive use of 1-800-333-HOPE. MNAPG agrees with this approach for sports betting. MNAPG will continue to use the Minnesota helpline number in its brochures and in-state only ads. Either way, the caller will be directed to the Minnesota vendor who handles the helpline. Until Minnesota decides to discontinue the HOPE number, MNAPG will support use of both numbers.

## Gambling on Professional Wrestling?

**The proliferation of gambling — in all its various forms and venues — continues.** Hard as it might be to believe, one can bet on events such as weather forecasts, celebrity deaths, ferret bingo, the next pope and the Oscars. And now ... wait for it ... professional wrestling.

Yes, professional wrestling, where outcomes are scripted in advance. While MNAPG is officially gambling-neutral, it was hard not to cast a questioning glance at the WWE's (World Wrestling Entertainment) March

announcement that it's looking to have its wrestling matches available for gambling.

Aside from the security issues involved in ensuring that the scripts are not made public until match date — a situation that would seem ripe with temptations for wrestlers to receive payoffs from gamblers under the table — one can also question whether gambling on such outcomes truly constitutes gambling.

The classic definition of gambling is "the wagering of something of value on

a random event (chance) with the intent of winning something else of value." One can question whether the element of chance is truly part of an event where the outcome has been predetermined.

This underscores the fact that gambling is everywhere — and it's ever-important for those concerned about problem gambling to be on their toes.





# Problem Gambling Advocacy Day 2023



**The ability to create more visibility — and ultimately more funding for prevention, research and treatment — for gambling addiction depends substantially on grassroots efforts by problem gambling and responsible gambling advocates from across the country.** To help “grease the skids” for these important advocacy efforts, NCPG will be holding its annual Problem Gambling Advocacy Day on July 26 in Washington, D.C., the day before NCPG’s annual conference.

Problem Gambling Advocacy Day brings together key stakeholders in a grassroots effort to highlight the importance of developing strong public policies relating

to problem gambling and appropriating the necessary funding for education, research, treatment and prevention.

NCPG will make participation easy by pairing participants with fellow advocates from their state and scheduling appropriate congressional meetings. For interested Minnesotans, NCPG will work to set up meetings with Senators Tina Smith and Amy Klobuchar, as well as your individual representative. NCPG will also train advocates prior to meetings to ensure they are prepared to make the most of their time with legislators. For more information, or to register for Problem Gambling Advocacy Day, visit [www.ncpgambling.org/programs-resources/advocacy/problem-gambling-advocacy-day](http://www.ncpgambling.org/programs-resources/advocacy/problem-gambling-advocacy-day).

For those unable to attend the conference and participate in Problem Gambling Advocacy Day in person, NCPG will be hosting a webinar ([www.ncpgambling.org/event/advanced-advocacy](http://www.ncpgambling.org/event/advanced-advocacy)) on May 2 at 1 p.m. Eastern Time to coach interested individuals on how to write an effective letter to their member of Congress. Whether planning to attend the webinar or not, to express your support for the GRIT Act (see article below) to your representative or senator directly, please visit their websites, which provide portals through which you can send a direct message.

## NCPG to Introduce GRIT Act

**Even as gambling — and gambling addiction — become normalized in the United States, no federal funds are currently set aside to address gambling treatment, prevention and research.** This is in stark contrast to the considerable national funds dedicated to addressing alcohol and drug addiction.

However, with the expected introduction of the GRIT Act (Gambling addiction, Recovery, Investment and Treatment) by the National Council on Problem Gambling in the coming months, there is hope that gambling addiction will ultimately receive the attention and financial consideration it has

long deserved.

The proposed legislation would set aside 50% of the federal sports excise tax revenue for gambling addiction treatment and research. Seventy-five percent of those funds would be distributed to states for gambling addiction prevention and treatment through the existing Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Block Grant program. The remainder would go to the National Institute of Drug Abuse to fund grants for research into gambling addiction.

“It’s important to note that this legislation would not increase any taxes to Americans,”

says Cole Wogoman, government relations manager for NCPG. “It simply sets aside an existing funding stream for problem gambling treatment and research that will continue to increase as online sports wagering becomes more prominent.”

NCPG plans to have the bill introduced to Congress in advance of NCPG Advocacy Day on July 26. “The legislation will provide language we can use to familiarize legislators with problem gambling issues and emphasize why a dedicated funding source is so important,” says Cole. Please see this page for more information about the GRIT Act.

## NCPG National Conference Registration is Open!



**NCPG’s national conference will take place in our nation’s capital in July.** MNAPG will again offer scholarships to approved problem gambling counselors

if they have joint memberships with MNAPG and NCPG. The scholarship will cover up to \$1,000 for attending either the in-person event in Washington, D.C., July 27-28 or the online pre-conference workshops the afternoons of June 14 and 15. Advocacy Day (see article in this issue of *Northern Light*) will be July 26 for

those who want to connect with their congressional representatives. More information on the scholarship can be obtained by contacting [ssstucker@mnapg.org](mailto:ssstucker@mnapg.org). Conference information can be found at <https://www.ncpgambling.org/national-conference/2023-2/>.

# Sports Betting Bill Update

The 2023 Minnesota legislative session started off with an early entry of the House's sports betting bill, later followed by an almost identical version by the Senate.

Over the weeks, MNAPG was in communication with Rep. Zack Stephenson and Sen. Matt Klein to discuss our continued concerns for increased consumer protections. As we write this, it's still unclear if the bill will pass.

We did manage to get an op-ed piece published in the *Star Tribune* regarding sports betting. You can read it at [www.mnapg.org/news](http://www.mnapg.org/news).



## Lower-Risk Gambling Guidelines

A low-risk approach to gambling means choosing to gamble on a limited basis and because it's a fun recreational activity. By following these three guidelines, you can ensure you gamble responsibly (all guidelines should be observed to maximize safety).

1

### HOW MUCH

Gamble no more than **1%** of household income before tax per month

and

4

### HOW OFTEN

Gamble no more than **4 days** per month

and

2

### HOW MANY

Avoid regularly gambling at more than **2 types** of games

## Action Required: Reserve Your Issue of *Northern Light*

In an effort to reduce printing and mailing costs, we will greatly reduce the number of hard copy newsletters we print going forward. If you'd like to continue receiving a print copy of this newsletter, please send an email with your name/ address and preference to [info@mnapg.org](mailto:info@mnapg.org).

If you would like to be added to a list for receiving an electronic version, please sign up online: [www.mnapg.org/sign-up-for-mnapg-emails](http://www.mnapg.org/sign-up-for-mnapg-emails).



## ORGANIZATIONAL MEMBERS

### Why belong to the Alliance?

You can make MNAPG's voice stronger and affirm the value of our work. Gambling disorder is a real and destructive addiction. Our work is not about prohibition, but to ensure those negatively impacted have available resources for recovery and to minimize the risks for all. Better informed consumers make better choices. More members equal greater credibility with decision makers. Visit our membership page at [MNAPG.org/membership](http://MNAPG.org/membership).

### PLATINUM



Draft Kings

### SILVER



Treasure Island Casino

### GOLD



Minnesota Indian Gaming Association



Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community



Running Aces



Canterbury Park



Minnesota State Lottery



Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe



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Minnesota Alliance  
on Problem Gambling

# Northern Light



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