

THE GAMBLING ADDICTION PREVENTION (GAP) ACT

Senators Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) and Steve Daines (R-MT)

The National Council on Problem Gambling estimates that as many as 56,000 active duty members of the Armed Forces meet criteria for gambling disorder, and studies have shown that veterans have elevated rates of gambling problems—at least twice the rate of the general adult population.¹ Gambling disorder is an addiction similar to other behavioral health disorders, such as those associated with alcohol and drugs.² In addition to causing financial and legal problems, it is also correlated with an increased incidence of suicide attempts, behavioral health disorders, and other behavioral health conditions.³ Prevalence of gambling disorder in the military is a serious health and financial issue, and also poses a national security concern, harming individual readiness and human performance and increasing affected servicemembers' susceptibility to blackmail and other malign influence.⁴ Less than 10 percent of people with gambling problems seek help, due to the shame, stigma and misunderstanding of gambling disorder.⁵

A 2017 report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that while slot machines were removed from all domestic military installations after 1951—when Congress prohibited gambling devices from being installed or used on any possession of the United States—the Department of Defense (DOD) currently has 3,141 slot machines on overseas U.S. military installations. Between fiscal years 2011 and 2015, those slot machines generated approximately \$100 million per year for the Department. However, the GAO also found that the DOD did not systematically screen military personnel for gambling disorder.⁶ The GAO recommended that the DOD incorporate questions on gambling disorder in its annual health assessments and DOD-wide surveys in order to better understand the prevalence of gambling disorder in the military and improve the military's ability to offer treatment.⁷ It also recommended that the DOD update its regulations, instructions, and other guidance related to behavioral health to explicitly include gambling disorder.

The Gambling Addiction Prevention (GAP) Act

Senators Warren and Daines introduced the Gambling Addiction Prevention (GAP) Act of 2018, which required DOD to include gambling disorder screening questions in health assessments for members of the Armed Forces and in other survey and research efforts. In 2018, language based on this provision of the GAP Act was signed into law as part of the FY2019 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA).

Senators Warren and Daines are introducing the updated Gambling Addiction Prevention (GAP) Act of 2019. The bill would require the DOD to develop policies and programs to prevent and treat gambling problems, in coordination with the Department's other behavioral health efforts. On military sites where gambling activities take place, such policies and programs would include provision of educational materials and promotion of responsible behavior. It also requires the Department to update its regulations, instructions, and guidance to explicitly include gambling disorder within 180 days of the passage of the Act.

Endorsed by the National Council on Problem Gambling, Association of Problem Gambling Service Administrators, Nevada Council on Problem Gambling, Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling, and Montana Council on Problem Gambling.

¹ National Council on Problem Gambling, “Gambling Addiction in Military,” February 2017, <http://www.ncpgambling.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/GAO-Report-Talking-Points-v4.pdf>; American Journal on Addictions, “Pathological and problem gambling among veterans in clinical care: prevalence, demography, and clinical correlates,” J. Westermeyer, J. Carnive, P. Thuras, and M. Spring, April 25, 2013, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23617862>.

² American Psychiatric Association, “What is Gambling Disorder?” <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/gambling-disorder/what-is-gambling-disorder>.

³ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, “Gambling Problems: An Introduction for Behavioral Health Services Providers,” 2014, <http://www.ncpgambling.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Gambling-Addiction-An-Introduction-for-Behavioral-Health-Providers-SAMHSA-2014.pdf>.

⁴ U.S. Government Accountability Office, “DOD and the Coast Guard Need to Screen for Gambling Disorder Addiction and Update Guidance,” Jan. 30, 2017, <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-17-114>.

⁵ U.S. Government Accountability Office, Supra.

⁶ U.S. Government Accountability Office, Supra.

⁷ U.S. Government Accountability Office, Supra.