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Missouri's \$500 Loss Limit: How it helps compulsive gamblers

By Joseph Day

No one disputes that the expansion of gambling brings those with compulsive and problem gambling into the fold. The question is how do you best handle the problem and most importantly, how do you help prevent such terrible addiction.

One of the conditions that the voters of Missouri agreed to when they approved riverboat gambling was the \$500 loss limit. The loss limit is the last remnant of the original law but it remains one of the most important pieces as it has tremendous success at reducing the effects of problem gambling.

It has been argued that the loss limit is not effective at reducing or helping compulsive gamblers and as such it should be removed. However, the loss limit helps to enforce the Missouri Disassociated Persons List, reduce the speed at which gamblers play the games, and limit the amount of financial loss that families experience as a result of gambling addiction.

There are currently over 12,000 people on the Missouri Disassociated Persons List (DAP). These people voluntarily chose to exclude themselves from casinos because in most cases they are compulsive and addicted gamblers. Its obvious these people are unable to simply stop gambling at the casino or they would not have gone through the lengthy and exhaustive process of putting themselves on this self-exclusion list.

This list is enforceable because each

patron must show identification and obtain a boarding pass to enter a Missouri casino. If a person is on the DAP, then the computer systems the casinos use to monitor boarding and chip buy-ins will alert casino employees. This system keeps over 12,000 people from entering the casino and gambling.

To date, no one has proposed any legislation aimed at removing the loss limit that would actually safe guard this system. Once gamblers are allowed to enter the casino floor and purchase chips without having to swipe a boarding pass there will be absolutely no check on the DAP. Casinos would only be required to check ID's for purposes of determining age eligibility. If the loss limit is removed 12,000 compulsive and problem gamblers will have instant access to the casinos and will relive the tragedies that compulsive gambling brings.

In a statement before the Missouri's Joint Legislative Committee on Gaming & Wagering, November 22, 2005, John W. Kindt, Professor of Business & Legal Policy at the University of Illinois, explained how loss limits help prevent compulsive and problem gambling. He supported his testimony with highly credible academically peer-reviewed data from sources ranging from the American Psychiatric Association to the National Gambling Impact Study Commission Final Report. He stated:

The socio-economic impacts generated by "loss limits" are effective

in reducing the speed and process by which new pathological and problem gamblers are created. Eliminating loss limits fuels the speed of the gambling and the addictive behavior which leads people to gambling activities evincing the 10 problematic diagnostic criteria. The faster people can gamble, the faster gamblers will get “hooked,” and this phenomenon is substantiated by studies demonstrating that pathological and problem gamblers gravitate toward the faster methods of gambling (i.e. [Electronic Gambling Devices, EGDs]) as evidenced by the high percentages of revenues EGDs generate from pathological and problem gamblers.

Those that argue the loss limit doesn't prevent addicted gamblers misunderstand the fact that the loss limit can help prevent addiction by slowing the rapid play down which causes the addiction.

In her book, *Machine Life: Control and Compulsion in Las Vegas*, to be published by Princeton University Press, Natasha Shull, PhD from MIT examines how EGD's are designed to control gamblers and get them to gamble to extinction, or the point in which they have no money left. When speaking at the National Coalition Against Gambling Expansion conference held in October 2007 she explained:

Video gambling platforms designed to narrow attention and numb peripheral awareness, produces a dissociative state that compulsive gamblers call “the zone” in which a sense of time, space, monetary

value, social relations, and physical embodiment actually dissolves... It's almost like the tempo they establish functions as a form of predictability, so we think of gambling as being about chance, but in fact it's this sort of control over rhythm and predictability that's structuring and regulating this zone.

The loss limit is what slows gamblers down and takes them out of this zone. They need to take breaks away from the machines or else addiction and financial loss can set in. It is clear that the removal of the loss limit will speed the game up, put gamblers in this zone, and could prevent gamblers from taking the breaks necessary to prevent huge amounts of loss and addiction.

The loss limit also protects the families of those who gamble in Missouri. The loss limit helps to ensure that a family won't lose their home in one day or that a child's education fund won't be gambled away in one day. And it will help to keep seniors from gambling away all of their retirement money in a day. In other states these situations are all too common. People just keep betting and betting until there is nothing left. In Missouri however, a safety net exists to slow down a gambler and make them walk away in hopes that someone will recognize the problem before its too late.

People may claim the loss limit does nothing to stop compulsive gambling, but it clearly limits the amount of financial loss, helps to reduce the speed at which gamblers play the games and most importantly, it helps keep 12,000 compulsive gamblers on the DAP from simply walking into a casino and experiencing the tragedies such compulsions bring.

