

Lifeline Canberra Inc

Submission in response to the Productivity Commission Gambling Inquiry Draft Report 2009.

This response to the Productivity Commission Draft Report into Gambling is based on Lifeline Canberra's experience being a provider of assistance to people experiencing problems with gambling in Canberra since 1991, our knowledge of and partnership with licensed Community Clubs providing gambling services to members and being an observer and participant in discussion about problem gambling and responsible gambling in the ACT for many years.

We believe that considering the valuable roles that community Clubs play across Australia and particularly here in the ACT, separately from the issue of examining more closely what can be done to create a safer gambling environment allows for a more productive exploration of each issue.

As a member of the community of Canberra since 1971, Lifeline Canberra recognises and values the integral role in the Canberra Community of our licensed Clubs. How these Clubs survive and continue to provide services to members and assistance to our community should gambling revenues decline, as is generally accepted they will, as a result of the harm minimisation proposals outlined in the Commissions report, needs to be addressed, if not in this report then through another mechanism.

The Club sector in Canberra has been active in taking steps to create a safer gambling environment and in 2001 approached Lifeline Canberra to provide additional gambling help to their members in addition to any legislative requirements they had or have, through the Clubcare partnership that was then formed and remains in place today. More than half of the funding for face to face problem gambling counselling in Canberra comes directly from licensed Community Clubs and ACTTAB through the Clubcare program. Already since the publication of the Commissions' draft report there have been approaches made to Lifeline Canberra by representatives of the Club sector within Canberra to explore what more can be done to assist their members experiencing problems with gambling.

It perhaps needs to be said that particularly relating to the provision of gambling service in the not for profit sector that the disbelief or scepticism about the results of newer, evolving and even at times inconsistent research about the extent of harm associated with excess gambling particularly gaming is not simply about preserving an income stream but that the concept of providing a service from which an apparently sizeable number of members experience harm is foreign to the ethos of the Clubs and offensive to the Boards, Management and Staff of the Clubs.

Lifeline acknowledges that we have no expertise to make comment on the financial impact of the proposed harm minimisation measures on the gaming industry.

As described in our original submission Lifeline Canberra believes that a universal pre commitment scheme requiring decisions to be made before a session of play as to the amount of time and money to be spent will be of significant benefit to people we have worked with experiencing problems with gambling. In an aroused state and already in the gambling environment our clients consistently report either having a good deal of difficulty sticking to their pre determined spending decision or having not made a clear decision at all. If an opt out system is to be introduced we believe modest default time and money limits should apply to a gambler who chooses not to pre commit.

Lifeline Canberra believes the lower bet sizes and limits on the amount of credits a machine can hold will help people stay within their limits and stay in touch with what they are spending.

Whilst perhaps in time it may prove possible to roll back some of the existing harm minimisation measures currently in place if these new measures prove particularly effective we urge caution in doing so. Just as the factors that contribute to people experiencing problems with gambling are varied so are the solutions and strategies that people find effective in overcoming their problems with gambling. Thus far there has not been one solution that fits all.

Whether particular harm minimisation measures are or will be effective has been the subject of much debate and at times inconclusive research. The quest for incontrovertible proof of efficacy has caused delays and inaction. We believe that regulators have an obligation to act, based on the best available evidence at the time to protect the most vulnerable, who appear to be regular gamblers, even if this does cause some inconvenience to gamblers who are not at risk.

Lifeline Canberra believes that it is essential that young people have an understanding of problem gambling and know how to gamble responsibly if they choose to gamble, before they leave school. Young adults are overly represented in the numbers of people identified as having problems with gambling. Further, research indicates young people are more vulnerable to developing problems if they do gamble and are less likely to seek professional assistance. Whilst supporting the Commissions' view that school based educational programs must be evaluated we felt the Commissions' recommendation that further roll out of programs be stopped was too strong.

Lifeline Canberra believes that responsible gambling education which includes; an awareness of problem gambling, responsible gambling strategies and accurate player information is important. However the training must also convey the understanding that we often don't behave and make decisions as rational human beings. That our decision making is affected by; our mood state, level of arousal, level of intoxication, the environment we are in, stressors we are under, coping and resilience resources we have and our human tendency to want to avoid uncomfortable or painful situations. The sort of content that belongs more in the Life skills area of curriculum rather than the mathematics area.

In closing, Lifeline Canberra believes that the Commission's decision to focus on harm minimisation in its draft report, for which it has been strongly criticised in other submissions and in public hearings, has made the report a more useful document in helping to make gambling a safer experience for the significant number of Australians either at moderate risk of or currently experiencing harm as a result of problems with gambling and their families.