

Relationships Australia Queensland

Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry by the State Office of Relationships Australia Queensland

Problem Gambling

Extent of Problem Gambling

The term "problem gambling" which is used in the Issues Paper, is more appropriate than the term "pathological gambling" which is used in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Fourth Edition) of the American Psychiatric Association where that manual describes the more extreme manifestations of the impulse control disorder.

While gambling could be classed as a problem if a person spent more than he/she could afford on one occasion, the common application of this term is to describe a person's repeated gambling in a manner which impairs the individual's social, emotional and economic functioning. It is regrettable that large sample random surveys of the gambling expenditure of individuals in the Australian population have not been undertaken. Per capita expenditure is known but not the manner in which this expenditure is distributed among gamblers.

If one were able to research the distribution of expenditure in proportion to each person's income for the whole population of Australian, there would be a certain percentage who never gambled, a large percentage of people who gamble from time to time but generally in a way which brings no significant harmful impact, another quite large group which experiences repeated harm because of their gambling, and a smaller group which experiences extremely damaging consequences. While the group which manifests extreme addiction may be limited to one percent or perhaps less of the population, the consequences for that group are grave. The size of the larger group of excessive or problem gamblers is not known but there is an urgent need for research to be undertaken to establish the profile of individual gambling as distinct from the average expenditure per head of population. For the larger group of excessive or problem gamblers the level of individual harm will be less but the adverse consequences to the community are likely to be greater. Estimates have placed the percentage of this group of excessive gamblers in the range of 5% to 8% depending upon the criteria used to describe the problem.

In this larger group of problem or excessive, but not necessarily pathological, gamblers there are effects upon family relationships when bills can not be paid, when cars or washing machines can not be replaced or repaired because there is no money available, when the electricity is cut off because the bill hasn't been paid. These cases may not lead to bankruptcy, fraud or suicide but taken as a group, these situations inflict a great deal of pressure on family life generally. The money that is spent on gambling comes from savings, from redundancy packages, lump sum retirement benefits, from marital property settlements, inheritances, from wages or social security, or from increased levels of personal debt.

Accessibility of Gambling

Australians have quite a long history of gambling on horses either with On-Course or Starting Price Bookmakers, or through the TAB. To a certain extent people had been educated over the years to be wary of the dangers of this form of gambling. When cash was the basis of the economy there was less ready access to credit through credit cards and ATMs, and this constituted a form of control.

In recent years which have been a time of economic difficulty for many people in the lower socio-economic groups, the Australian dream of working to own one's home has become an impossible dream. For many the only hope of reaching this goal is through 'having a big win'. Almost out of despair of ever getting ahead,

many have turned to what is promoted as their only chance - winning Lotto, a jackpot on the pokies, the horses, the Casino.

Advertising

Advertising is targeted at the person's vulnerability. "Machines have made work easier, our machines may make it unnecessary. Come to the Casino". Messages like this are being sent to a vulnerable group of people. The extremely rapid growth of access to gambling venues has moved far ahead of any efforts to prepare the community to develop resistance to advertising messages. Gambling is called "entertainment" or "playing"; it is presented as being natural behaviour that everyone does. The reality is that this country has a large group of people who are problem gamblers; the pretense is that people are gambling what they can afford to lose.

The change in Queensland government policy to allow a large number of gaming machines in clubs, distorted the economic balance between licensed clubs and hotels. Rather than reducing the number of gaming machines in clubs, more machines were offered to hotels. The ease of local access to gaming machines has increased the number of people who are gambling and therefore, has also increased the size of the group which falls into the problem gambling range. Whilst it is appropriate to recognise the extreme pathological gambler, it is essential also to recognise the rapidly growing problem gambling sector.

Hiding the problem

With **problem drinking** it was the conventional wisdom to recognise that the extreme alcoholic had a problem and that the community should try to help such people. The individuals that people easily identified were the "skid row" derelicts who had lost their family, their home, their health. Many people with less obvious drinking problems were not identified and there was no pressure put upon them to address their drinking behaviour. A parallel position applies with gambling. If the community is serious in addressing the harm which results from gambling, it needs to **address the whole range of gambling**. The community needs to be educated about responsible approaches to gambling and to recognise the risky and harmful patterns.

Advertising and Education

A frequently suggested solution to social health issues has been to incorporate themes into the school curriculum. Whilst this can be a useful strategy, its effect is going to be limited in comparison with the constant advertising of gambling in the electronic and print media, on hoardings and on buses. There needs to be restriction on promotional advertising of gambling as there has been on alcohol and tobacco promotion. Self regulation in such an area is unlikely to be effective. This program to minimise gambling related harm should be linked to the revenue which is gained by State Governments from gambling taxes. At present the States are gaining the income but much of the cost of the harm is being picked up by the Commonwealth e.g family support.

There needs to be a coordinated ongoing program of public education about what might be considered as excessive gambling. As the National Health and Medical Research Council has issued Guidelines for safer drinking, similarly there needs to be a set of guidelines for responsible gambling which are widely promulgated in the community.

Focusing on extreme cases allows some problem gamblers to rationalise their own problematic behaviour. Proprietors of gaming venues no doubt are concerned about the extreme cases who lose everything. But the reality is that venue operators do benefit from the larger group of people who are problem or excessive gamblers. It is acknowledged that there are difficulties in identifying which patron is a problem gambler because a venue operator generally is not aware of the financial status of each patron.

Accessibility of Counselling Services

If it is accepted that problem gambling exists in every community, then it is important that appropriate counselling services are accessible to every community. While the recent provision of a Gambling Helpline as a pilot project in several Queensland communities is welcomed, there is a need for easily accessible face to face counselling to complement the 24 hour crisis telephone service. Crisis lines do meet an important need and when they are permanently and universally available they will be a valuable addition to current services. The existence of crisis counselling and face to face counselling is important but it is even more important that those who need to know of the service, are aware that it is available and know how to contact it.

Knowing about counselling services

It appears that the knowledge of where counselling can be obtained is not widely shared in the community. While casino patrons who access Break Even, report learning of Break Even through signs and cards on the back of toilet doors at casinos, a lot of hotels and clubs do not exhibit signage despite the legal requirement to do so. There is a need to ensure compliance with this requirement by hotels and clubs. In many cases, however, it is the partner of the problem gambler who needs to be aware of the service. Sometimes the partners want to access counselling to obtain help for themselves; sometimes they want to get information which they can pass on to their problem gambling partner. The degree of public awareness which is required can only be achieved by an ongoing campaign using electronic and print media. Radio would seem to offer an effective and less expensive medium to provide necessary coverage.

The Nature of a Gambling Problem

Gambling problems are increasingly being viewed as a form of addictive behaviour. This does not imply that the behaviour is a disease or that it requires medical or psychological treatment. It has to be recognised that many people who have been addicted to tobacco after recognising the harm it was causing them, decided to change their smoking behaviour. Many people who have been very heavy smokers for years have decided to stop and have maintained smoking cessation for years, without professional counselling intervention.

Similar experiences are reported by some gamblers. Some gamblers on the other hand experience a complex mix of depression, effects of past traumatic events, problems in socialisation or interpersonal relationships, personality structure, and a prevailing culture which makes behavioural change more difficult and professional help more necessary. For many people the supportive fellowship of Gamblers Anonymous is a great assistance in maintaining a gambling free lifestyle.

Where professional help is sought, the extent of help required and its duration can vary greatly. For some, two or three sessions can be an effective intervention; for others it is necessary to spend perhaps fifteen or twenty sessions exploring past events or problems caused to present relationships. For a small percentage of persons extensive work on reorganising financial affairs is necessary while others are able to handle their own financial affairs easily when they have cease gambling.

Suicidal ideation is frequently reported by clients who access Break Even services. This is not surprising when one considers the impact of family break up and loss of house or inheritance. Sometimes excessive gambling is the response to, rather than the cause of, family break-up. Generally, the therapeutic intervention needs to address the emotional state of the clients, their work and use of leisure, their relationships, their values as well as issues related to changing actual gambling behaviour. Strategies to control access to cash and developing money plans are usually a significant early part of the counselling intervention. Some clients present with signs or symptoms of disorders which indicate that a medical referral is appropriate to consider medication and psychiatric assessment. Among problem gamblers there is a percentage of people who have been placed on sickness benefits for psychiatric disorders. Some of these people who live in low budget accommodation find a trip to a club for a cheap meal and the opportunity to play the pokies is the social highlight of their fortnight. The lack of other opportunities for community involvement is probably a contributing factor in their problematic gambling. Many do not buy sufficient food to last till next pension day, before embarking on their fortnightly gambling entertainment.

Clients of Break Even Counselling Services on the Gold Coast

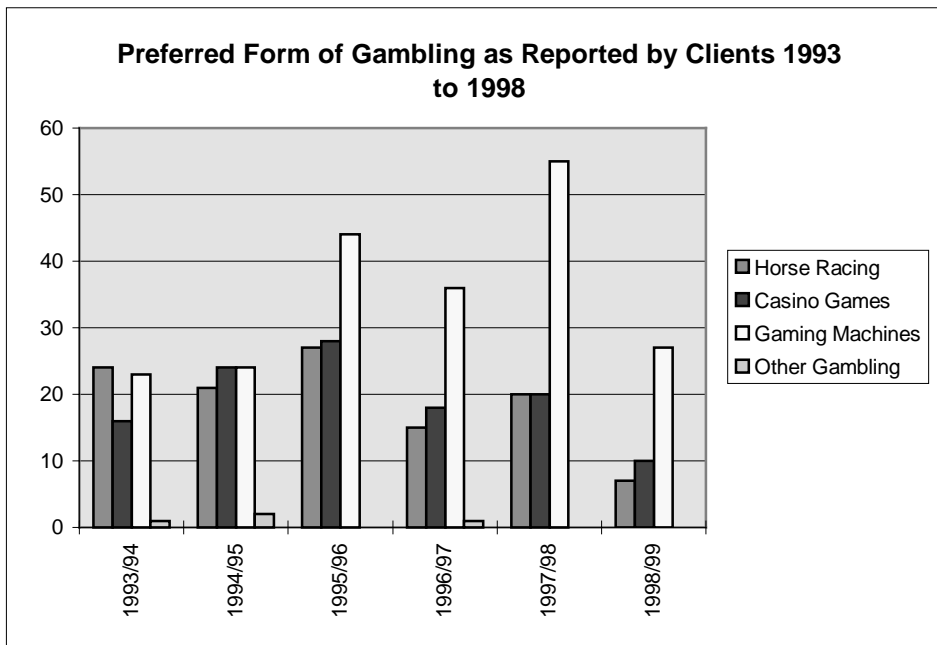
The Gold Coast Client Service Unit of Relationships Australia Queensland has been offering counselling services for problem gamblers and family members of persons with a gambling problem since May 1993. Statistical Data Reports relating to this service are attached in Appendix 1 to this submission together with Explanatory Notes to identify events in the local area which may have impacted upon the data.

The data on the Preferred Form of Gambling reported by Break Even clients at the Gold Coast has been combined to show the total from Clubs, Hotels and the Casino in relation to electronic gaming machines (as distinct from Casino table games) **compared with the annual figures for other forms of gambling**. The trends in relation to the problems experienced by users of electronic gaming machines need to be considered in conjunction with the number of machines per head of population in this region. The data supports the view that the proliferation of gaming machines is correlated with the number of people seeking help for their problems.

**Break Even Gold Coast
Preferred Form of Gambling as Reported by Clients
1 May 1993 to 31 October 1998**

	1993/94	1994/95	1995/96	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99
Horse Racing	24	21	27	15	20	7
Casino Games	16	24	28	18	20	10
Gaming Machines	23	24	44	36	55	27
Other Gambling	1	2	0	1	0	0
Total:	64	71	99	70	95	44

(N = 443)



Note:

1. 1998/1999 - Data covers four (4) months only.
2. 1996/1997 - Counselling staff vacancies reduced number of client appointments available.

Training and Coordination of Services

Relationships Australia in Queensland receives funding from the Department of Families, Youth and Community Care to provide appropriate counselling services . It employs graduates in the social sciences as addictions counsellors. It adopts an holistic approach to working with problem gamblers. Addictions counsellors are required to satisfy the requirements of a two stage accreditation process during which time staff members have at least one hour per week of clinical supervision as well as participating in a training program. The agency has recently developed an Advanced Diploma in Addiction Counselling which is being submitted for VETEC accreditation. This course combines both theoretical training in assessment and addiction treatment as well as providing practical experience in field placements. It is believed that it will attract recent graduates in Psychology and Social Work who are keen to obtain supervised experience in a specialist field. Relationships Australia Qld believes that this course will be a valuable resource for providing training for counsellors needed to work in this growing problem area.

Recommendations:-

1. Reduction in the number of electronic gaming machines

The rapid growth in the number of people reporting problems in their use of electronic gaming machines suggests that this form of gambling needs to be restricted. This could be achieved by setting the present number of machines as an absolute limit and reducing that number by a set percentage for a number of years. Concentration of machines per head of population should be carefully monitored.

In order to provide for new communities a system of transfers might be developed to allow transfers from one location to another.

2. Develop a code of advertising with which compliance is mandatory.

Gambling can be a damaging addictive behaviour. Some of the advertising is extremely seductive and distorts the truth.

3. Ensure compliance in relation to mandatory signs about help for gambling problems.

Many venues do not exhibit the signs where they can be seen. Many problem gamblers do not wish to be seen taking a card about help for problem gamblers. Some venue proprietors think such signs are bad for business and are reluctant to display signs.

4. Develop a workable system of self exclusion from venues for patrons who recognise that they have a gambling problem.

The system operating in casinos generally seems to assist former patrons to avoid the temptation to relapse to gambling behaviour. In Queensland clubs and hotels there is no similar provision for self-exclusion although venue proprietors have a duty to exclude patrons who they know to be gambling beyond their means. Even if a relative or friend makes such a report, there is reluctance to take action because of the difficulty of establishing whether the gambling is beyond the patron's financial resources.

5. Guidelines for Responsible Gambling

Develop a set of guidelines on responsible approaches to gambling which can be used to educate gamblers as adult members of the community as well as incorporating similar material into school education curricula.

6. Public Education campaigns

The purpose would be to educate the population in responsible attitudes to gambling - these should address cognitive, affective and behavioural domains and should be ongoing rather than one-off events..

There is a need to ensure awareness in the community of counselling services for problem gamblers and for family members affected by problem gamblers.

BREAK EVEN GOLD COAST
Explanatory Notes to Accompany Data Reports
1 May 1993 to 31 October 1998

TOTAL DEBTS REPORT

A review of levels of debt for gamblers presenting to Break Even (N=443) identified 36% of individuals identified as having any debts. The remaining 64% identified as having varying levels of debt with 59% in the under \$40,000 category. This report corresponds with findings in the Correlates of Gambling Report where 45% identified severe financial issues 'borrowed money to gamble and unable to pay back' and 26% identified moderate financial issues 'gambling to win money to pay debts or family paid debts' A further 17% reported 'spending more on gambling than they can afford'. To sum up, 88% of gambling clients reported mild, moderate or severe financial matters in the Correlates of Gambling Report.

Annual statistics provided by the Insolvency and Trustee Services Australia (ITSA) indicate a 250% increase in the number of Bankruptcies in Queensland during the financial years 93/94 to 97/98. In the period since the introduction of gaming machines in Queensland and the proliferation of gaming products throughout the State.

YEARS GAMBLING REPORT

The report indicates 53% (n=235) of gambling clients as having experienced problems from their gambling in the one to five year period. The report indicates differences between male and female gambling in that men appear to have been involved with gambling for longer periods than their female counterparts.

In reviewing this report the following information in relation to the Gaming Industry should be considered.

Gaming Machines have been available in the Northern New South Wales area of the Gold Coast since 1956. Conrad Jupiters Casino opened on the Gold Coast in November 1985. At the time of opening, poker machines were not allowed in Queensland however, Keno machines and Card machines were allowed in the Casino. On 18 May 1991 the *Gaming Machine Act 1991* was passed, authorising the operation of gaming machines in Queensland licensed clubs and hotels. The first machines commenced operation in clubs in February 1992 and in hotels in April of the same year. At this point, gaming machines were also introduced in Jupiters Casino.

It should be noted that the figures reported for the period 98/99 cover four (4) months only - 1 July to 31 October, 1998.

REFERRAL SOURCES

On 26th October, 1995 a Patron Assistance Program was launched at Conrad Jupiters Casino. This program involved a series of promotional items in the form of posters, brochures and business cards being made available to patrons in the bathroom areas of the Casino. Since the introduction of this initiative by the Casino, Break Even has seen a distinct increase in referrals from the Gaming Industry which is attributed directly to the success of this project. This would indicate a strong argument for similar projects to be implemented in all gaming venues. The Gaming Machine Regulations s20 requires signs to be placed in venues (clubs and hotels) however, our experience suggests that this legislation is not always adhered to. We believe that the high number of self referrals in the sample (n=159) 23% is also partially attributable to the Casino project coupled with the acceptance of Break Even by the local community, Community Agencies and good support from the local media (press, radio and television).

GAMBLERS FAVOURITES

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INTERVIEW ASSESSMENT

The assessment tool used in assessment is the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders DSM-IV for Pathological Gambling. Persistent and recurrent maladaptive gambling behaviour as indicated by five (or more) of the ten criteria. Of the Interview Assessment data 84% (n=370) of the gamblers interviewed indicated yes to five or more out of the item battery.

RECIDIVIST RATES

In the period since 10 May 1993 when the Break Even - Gold Coast service opened to clients, to the end of October 1998, we have seen 608 people as clients of the service. Seventy-four people have returned to access services from Break Even - Gold Coast after termination of counselling, for a total of 682 clients of the service and representing a recidivist rate of 11%.

The recidivist rate for male clients (13%) was slightly higher than that for female clients (9%).

OCCUPATION

A review of the occupations of people who have accessed our service revealed a high proportion of clients are not in the workforce. Forty percent of our clients were either pensioners (n = 102), unemployed (n = 74), employed full time in home duties (n = 60), retired (n = 28) and full time students (n = 11). Within the 60% of our clients who were employed, the largest single occupational type was professionals (n = 72), followed by workers in sales / marketing (n = 71).

As a single group, by occupational type, pensioners represented the largest group of gamblers (n = 102; 14.95% all clients; 37.1% clients not in the workforce). This group consists of people on age, service, sickness, disability, widow, carer and sole parent benefits. It would appear that these people who are on low incomes and possibly without meaningful activity to occupy themselves, present to our service for assistance with gambling related problems, more frequently than any other group.

People who were unemployed (n = 74) represented 10.8% of Break Even Gold Coast clients between May 1993 and October 1998; annual unemployment rates for Queensland over this period have ranged from 8.9 - 10.4% (p.54, ABS: QLD Yearbook 1998).

INCOME REPORT

Review of the income levels of individuals presenting to Break Even Gold Coast, parallel the early observed phenomena that many of our clients were in occupation sectors associated with low incomes.

The largest group (n = 255) presenting for assistance at Break Even were people whose incomes were less than \$10,000 pa. This group represented 37% of all Break Even Gold Coast clients. A further 11% (n = 80) of Break Even clients were on incomes between \$10,000 and \$14,999 pa.

Proportions of clients accessing our service, from each income group, appear to parallel those proportions within the Gold Coast area. The Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996 census, demonstrated that almost half of the Gold Coast's population aged over 15 years had an annual income of less than \$15,600, this proportion is close to our finding that 48% of Break Even clients, between 1993 and the present, have been on incomes of less than \$15,000.

Four percent of Break Even Gold Coast clients have had annual incomes of \$50,000 and above, the ABS, 1996 census demonstrated that 3.4% of Gold Coasters were on incomes in excess of \$52,000. Again the number of people presenting to Break Even Gold Coast for assistance in this income group, approximates that proportion within our community.

Assuming our clients constitute a representative sample of Gold Coast problem gamblers, proportionately, residents of the area across all income levels appear to be equally at risk of problem gambling.

BIRTHPLACE REPORTS

Analysis of the birthplaces of Break Even Gold Coast clients revealed that 507 of the 682 clients were born in Australia. This figure represents 74% of our client group. The Australian Bureau of Statistics, Queensland Yearbook, 1998 (p.39) indicated that 79.6% of Queensland residents were born in Australia.

The second largest group by birthplace (n = 60), accessing support through Break Even - Gold Coast, were people born in the United Kingdom. These people constituted 8.8% of our client group, and according to the ABS Queensland Yearbook, 1998 (p.39) represent 5.7% of Queensland residents.

The third largest client group by birthplace (n = 43), were New Zealanders. They constituted 6% of our client base and represent 3.1% of the Queensland population (ABS: Queensland Yearbook, 1998, p.39)

It appears people of Anglo-Saxon heritage are the vast majority of our client base on the Gold Coast. Australian born people have presented to Break Even at a slightly lesser rate, than is indicated by their proportion of the Queensland community, and people born in the United Kingdom and New Zealand have presented at slightly higher rates. It is difficult due to the size of the sample group, to know whether these variations represent significant differences without conducting the appropriate statistical analysis.

People born in other parts of Europe constituted 6% of our client group and represent 3.3% of Queensland's population. It does appear that people born in Europe present to Break Even Gold Coast at a higher proportion than they are represented within the community.

People born in Asia represented 2.6% of the Queensland population, and 1.7% of Break Even Gold Coast clients. The popular myth that Asians more at risk of problem gambling is not supported by the birthplace data collected about our clients. This observation can neither confirm or refute those popular myths. The birthplace data collected, although appearing to indicate that people from all birthplaces experience gambling problems at approximately the same prevalence rates, may in actuality reflect the failure of this service to target particular cultural groups or the stigma attached to seeking help within some cultural groups.

POSTCODE REPORTS

Review of the home postcode areas of Break Even Gold Coast clients allows us to draw an interesting apparent correlation. Postcode areas which are near to, or coincide with, larger gaming venues correlate with larger numbers of clients residing in these areas.

The single largest group of Break Even clients by postcode area have come from the Southport / Labrador area (n = 75). This locality has experienced the greatest increase in availability since the introduction of poker machines to Queensland in 1992; including the three Gold Coast clubs with the greatest numbers of poker machines: Southport Australian Football Club (264 machines), Southport Memorial R.S.L. (220 machines) and The Southport Working Men's and Women's Club (138 machines).

The second largest group of clients have come from the Broadbeach postcode area (n = 67), this is the same postcode area as the Jupiters Casino, the Gold Coast's largest gaming venue, which has 1176 gaming machine and 87 tables. Postcode areas physically neighbouring the Broadbeach area, include Carrara / Nerang (n = 46 clients), and Surfers Paradise (n = 52 clients).

In the areas physically incorporating and surrounding our catchment area's other major gambling area, the Tweed Heads / Tweed Heads South area; 39 of our clients have come from the Tweed Heads South area, 30 from Tweed Heads, and 12 from Coolangatta.

GENDER REPORTS

Between 1993 and the present, Break Even Gold Coast has provided services to 682 clients. Female clients have constituted 322 of these clients and men, 360. In early years of operation men accessed the service at higher rates than women, in the 1993/94 financial year 67 clients were men and 49 were women; for the last three years, men have accessed our service at approximately the same rates as women: 1996/97 50 men: 51 women; 1997/98 66 men: 63 women; and 1998/99 (first four months only) 31 men : 27 women. As clients, these people may be gamblers, their partners or family members; this data does not reflect that equal numbers of each gender are problem gamblers, but that apparently equal numbers of men and women, access Break Even Gold Coast because of the gambling problem in their family.

Among the clients who were gamblers, 157 were women and 286 were men. Amongst clients who were partners of gamblers 118 were women and 26 were men. Other clients included 47 women and 48 men. From this data, it appears gamblers access help more often than do other family who are affected by the gambling. It also appears that more men than women experience problems with gambling. Review of the changes, across our years of operation, in the male/female ratio of our clients who were gamblers, reveals that in our early years of service many more men than women presented with gambling problems. In our first year of operation the number of male gamblers (n = 49) was over double the number of female gamblers (n = 19). While numbers of male gamblers remains significantly higher than those of female gamblers, the difference has become less significant; 1996/97 44 men : 26 women; 1997/98 57 men : 38 women. It appears more women are beginning to experience problems with their own gambling and are beginning to present for counselling.

FOOTNOTES

1. When reviewing the data presented about the Break Even Gold Coast service. It may appear that fewer people experienced problems with gambling in the year 1996/97 than in the preceding and proceeding years. Rather than reflecting a change in the number of people attempting to access assistance, the lower number of clients accessing our service in that year, reflects a change in staffing. This change led to a period without one Counsellor and an ensuing period in which the newly recruited staff member developed knowledge of our clientele and worked toward a full case load.
2. All 1998/99 data presented is for the period July 1 to October 31, 1998 (4 months).