

Submission on behalf of St Vincent de Paul Queensland Social Justice Committee to the Senate

Committee on Gambling Reform – January 2011

1. As members of the St Vincent de Paul Society we are committed to “co-operate in shaping a more just and compassionate Australian community, ... our preferred option in this mission of service is to work with the poor in development, by respecting their dignity, sharing our hope, and encouraging them to take control of their destiny.” (Mission Statement)
2. The Social Justice Committee of the St Vincent De Paul Society of Queensland regards gambling reform as integral to this mission as our members encounter on a regular basis the personal, financial and social harm caused to families we assist by problem gambling. The social costs of problem gambling are well-documented in the Productivity Commission Report on Gambling which are estimated financially to cost \$4.7 billion a year (Productivity Commission). These costs include suicide, depression, relationship breakdown, lowered work productivity, job loss, bankruptcy and crime (SVDP National Policy). *Queensland Community Sector’s Position Statement Regarding Queensland’s Responsible Gambling Strategy* (Sept 2009) demonstrates how the highest concentrations of gaming machines are in lower socio-economic and remote indigenous communities. (p.3)
3. Gaming machines are the focus of our concerns as they account for 65% of total gambling expenditure and 75-80% of problem gamblers estimated at 115 000 with another 280 000 categorised as “at moderate risk”. When taken as a proportion of the number of persons engaged in gambling these are very significant numbers (Productivity Commission.) We also need to take into consideration the families and acquaintances of these people who are affected by their behaviour.
4. The adoption of the recommendations of the Productivity Commission’s report forms part of the St Vincent De Paul Society’s National Policy on *Harm Minimisation in the Poker Machine Industry* particularly in respect to the following which are seen as substantial and effective reform initiatives as opposed to token or ineffective measures:

- “The amount of cash that players can feed into machines at any one time should be limited to \$20 (currently up to \$10,000).
 - There are strong grounds to lower the betting limit to around \$1 per ‘button push’ instead of the current \$5-\$10.
 - Shutdown periods for gaming in hotels and clubs are too brief and mostly at the wrong times. They should commence earlier and be of longer duration.
 - Better warnings and other information in venues would help.
 - Relocating ATMs away from gaming floors and imposing a \$250 daily cash withdrawal limit in gaming venues would help some gamblers.
 - Problem gambling counselling services have worked well overall. But there is a need for enhanced training and better service coordination.”
 - Mandatory Pre-commitments.
5. There is great concern that governments will lack the motivation and will to implement effective harm minimisation measures as they will reduce the income governments derive from gambling and there will be strong pressure from powerful lobby groups connected to the licensed club and gaming machine industries. Any lack of will to implement effective harm minimisation measures however will indicate that governments and organisations are prepared to continue to profit from the misery of problem gamblers who contribute such a significant proportion of income derived from gambling.
6. The arguments put forward that the gaming industry contributes substantially to community organisations should be viewed in light of the overall investments being made by licensed clubs and what proportion goes to community organisations. Experience in other states (Western Australia) shows that sporting clubs need not be dependent on poker machine revenue in order to provide opportunities for participation and involvement. The Queensland Government’s Gaming Community Benefit Fund invested only 1.18% of revenue derived from gambling back into community organisations in 2008/9. Such investment might

be viewed as promotional activity aimed at legitimising government involvement in the proceeds of activity which has a detrimental effect on families and communities in the state.

7. The arguments of the pro-gambling lobby regarding the loss of revenue and employment opportunities due to the adoption of harm minimisation recommendations should be offset by the increased spending and opportunities in other sectors such as housing and retail when this income flows towards more socially desirable avenues of spending.
8. We wish to emphasise that we do not support a prohibition on gambling viewing it as a legitimate recreational activity if it is properly regulated. Our goal is the minimisation of harm to families in the context of addressing those issues of social disadvantage which make gambling an attractive option for the people who can least afford it. Education, employment, mental health and housing are all issues which have a vital role to play here.

REFERENCES

National Policy of the St Vincent De Paul Society – Harm Minimisation in the Poker Machine Industry, December 2010 (Attached)

Queensland Community Sector Position Statement Regarding Queensland's Responsible Gambling Strategy, September 2009 (Attached)

2010 Productivity Commission Report into Gambling, June 2010