



**Submission to the Joint Select
Committee on Gambling Reform
*Inquiry into the prevention and
treatment of problem gambling***

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About Us

Mission Australia

Mission Australia is a national, not for profit organisation that has been transforming the lives of Australians in need for more than 150 years. Our vision is to see a fairer Australia by eliminating disadvantage for vulnerable Australians. We aim to do so by strengthening families, empowering youth, striving to solve homelessness and providing employment solutions.

In 2010-11 Mission Australia Community Services delivered 349 services (including our Early Learning Services), assisted 133,807 individuals and 8,568 families and provided a total some 103,728 instances of service while our 210 Employment Solutions teams worked with 154,929 job seekers. During that same period MA Housing grew their portfolio to 1,071 properties¹ substantially increasing the number of people they were able to assist with housing.

Part of our service delivery includes the provision of gambling counselling and support in NSW and the ACT. In 2011, our 10 gambling counselling services provided support to problem gamblers and their families in the form of individual/family or group counselling. Some of these services are integrated into the financial counselling services we offer to assist individuals to better manage their money.

Mission Australia is concerned about the impacts of problem gambling on individuals and the community and has, for many years, been calling on governments at all levels to take action to reduce it. We acknowledge that, as with alcohol consumption, most adults are responsible gamblers and have a right to choose forms of entertainment provided they don't impact on the well-being of others. However we also see first-hand the worst impacts of problem gambling: our clients not only experience financial crisis and bankruptcy but also relationship breakdown, homelessness, depression and even suicide.

Our vision for a fairer Australia also mandates that we advocate for policies to address the causes of disadvantage whether they be from addictions or other economic and social factors. Our approach to problem gambling reflects this approach and as such we offer services aimed at minimising the risks of gambling and other addictions later in life - beginning with our children and family programs. It is our service delivery experience in gambling counselling and support, as well as our client experience within other MA services, that forms the basis of this submission.

Taking a person-centred approach we focus on the economic, social and physical well-being of our clients and raise concerns about products and services that have an adverse impact on clients. In doing so we acknowledge the financial support we receive through clubs via the proceeds of gambling. Because of the potential for harm, we believe that gaming venues have a responsibility to fund gambling counselling services. In NSW we also receive funding through the Responsible Gambling Fund (RGF), which receives its income from a tax levied on the Sydney Casino. The RGF is explicitly for the purpose of reducing problem gambling and promoting responsible gambling.

¹ Mission Australia (2011) *Annual Report 2011; Towards 2020*. Mission Australia; Sydney.

Mission Australia has also trained and sourced clients for employment in clubs, hotels and casinos via our employment pathways.

Terms of Reference: A - Measures to prevent problem gambling.

In 2011 we supported poker machine reform to address problem gambling and publicly called on State and Federal governments to implement the pre-commitment recommendations made in the Productivity Commission's Report into Gambling². We did so as we believe the reforms will help reduce problem gambling, produce widespread individual and community benefits and have minimal impact on recreational gamblers or on the clubs sector. Mission Australia welcomed the Government's announcement that it would undertake a large scale trial of mandatory pre-commitment and expand pre-commitment technology to every poker machine across the country³.

While disappointed that a national scheme is likely to be delayed, Mission Australia supports a trial of mandatory pre-commitment, as has been proposed for the ACT, as a 'second best' option. We emphasise the importance of the trial being based on 'mandatory' pre-commitment, not 'voluntary' pre-commitment which we believe would be ineffective.

We are clear in our view that every year we delay the introduction of a national mandatory pre-commitment policy, tens of thousands of problem gamblers – and their families and communities – will continue to suffer as a result of not being able to access such a scheme.

Nevertheless, we are confident that a trial will clearly illustrate the benefits of mandatory pre-commitment and prove that it can be introduced with minimal impact on clubs laying the groundwork for its national expansion.

Harm minimisation

Mission Australia supports the broad harm minimisation strategies proposed in the Productivity Commission report. In relation to the specific measures proposed, MA supports:

- Lowering bet limits on poker machines to one dollar per button push as well as limits on how much can be put in a machine at any one time. This is because our experience working with problem gamblers shows that 'high-intensity play' poses a significant risk for this group.
- Implementation of a pre-commitment system, but we would need to see how this would be implemented to form a view on its efficacy. If it was effective, this would have the potential to remove the need for some other measures, such as restrictions on ATMs.
- Regulated shutdowns for gaming rooms in hotels and clubs be extended because there is evidence that high-risk gamblers represent a much greater share of people playing late at night, a time when they are also often under the influence of alcohol.
- Reimbursing patrons through cheque payment or direct account crediting for wins over \$250, which is already the case in Qld, as this helps to overcome the likelihood for problem

² <http://www.pc.gov.au/projects/inquiry/gambling-2009/report>

³ <http://www.jennymacklin.fahcsia.gov.au/mediareleases/2012/Pages/TacklingProblemGamblinginAustralia.aspx>

gamblers to re-invest their winnings in the hope of chasing a 'lucky streak', which is a popular myth about poker machines.

- Removing ATMs from gaming areas, which is regularly cited by problem gamblers as something which would assist them to manage their gambling as it forces them to take a time out and leave the area. This is already being put in place in some jurisdictions.

In relation to the specific measures outlined for response our service providers have indicated the following:

(i) Use and display of responsible gambling messages

There is a need for more community awareness and other initiatives (such as advertising) about problem gambling and the effects it has on the individual, their family and the broader community. Public campaigns should resonate with individuals if they are to provide a means by which to dispel the myths that exist about problem gambling.

There is also a need to educate and raise awareness for the broader community and gamblers specifically of issues associated with having a gambling problem – such as addressing the stigma associated with having a gambling problem; dispelling the myths about being able to beat the system; and encouraging people to identify the signs of trouble and seek help with their gambling at the earliest signs their gambling is becoming problematic.

These broader initiatives could then be linked specific messages about responsible gambling that could be placed within venues and/or online where appropriate.

(ii) Use, access and effectiveness of other information on risky or problem gambling, including campaigns

Given the expense of media campaigns we would argue there is a need for them to be funded through government rather than problem gambling services.

As noted above, there is a need to ensure that information on risky or problem gambling resonates with the intended audience for it to be effective. A centralised media campaign will ensure no duplication of resources at the local level and that a well-researched and informed campaign can be developed nationally.

(iii) Ease of access to assistance for problem gambling

One of the significant impediments to addressing problem gambling is the issue of access to services. There is a need to both improve access to counselling services for those who have developed a gambling problem and diversify the nature of services available.

For example, consideration should be given to the provision of:

- outreach services; services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders experiencing problem gambling;
- Discreet provision of services to reduce the impact of stigma and encourage individuals to seek assistance.

It is also important that information on the range of services available to provide assistance with problem gambling be displayed throughout gambling venues and also made available on online gambling sites.

We consider the funding of gambling help services is of key importance and that it is a responsibility of the industry to provide this funding and to contribute to the promotion of services.

Terms of Reference: B - Measures which can encourage risky gambling behaviour.

In relation to measures that can encourage risky gambling behaviour our service providers have identified the following:

(i) Marketing strategies

Gambling has become normalised and entrenched in the coverage of sports events and sports reporting more generally. Recently a prominent sports commentator concluded his show with the slogan “bet higher”. Clearly there is a need to regulate commentary that normalises gambling and encourages people to participate in gambling at higher levels. There is also a need to reduce the promotion of gambling advertising. We would also like to see an end to the sponsorship of sports teams by gambling businesses such as the bans imposed on alcohol and tobacco advertising given the broader social impact of such advertising.

(ii) Use of inducements/incentives to gamble;

We would like to see inducements such as free bets, the provision of drinks or food vouchers at gambling venues, and the prizes available to induce gambling regulated. The rationale for this regulation has already been made in the public health field in relation to the tactics used by the alcohol industry to promote excessive and risky alcohol consumption. Given there is a common feature of problematic use associated with both alcohol and gambling it would appear logical to use a similar approach to remove the use of inducements or incentives to gamble.

Terms of Reference: C - Early intervention strategies and training of staff

Mission Australia’s Gambling Smart Program provides training for health and welfare workers across NSW to educate them on how to address problem gambling in Aboriginal Communities. We also have former problem gamblers providing education in schools and through sporting groups, including our current provision of education sessions for the NRL. We support harm minimisation strategies for gamblers with a focus on problem gamblers.

Online gaming

Mission Australia will support the Australian Government taking a leading role in influencing the design of global consumer protection standards while online gaming is still in its infancy.

Terms of Reference: D - Methods currently used to treat problem gamblers and the level of knowledge and use of them.

(i) counselling, including issues for counsellors,

Our experience, and the experience of other services around the country is that counselling is a particularly effective way to assist people manage their gambling problem and provides a means to break the cycle of problem gambling. Our services work with individuals and families to support not just the person with the gambling problem, but also those around them who are often just as much affected by the impacts of gambling as the person themselves.

Ongoing training and clinical supervision for counsellors is important to us as it helps ensure our counsellors have the resilience and support necessary to keep on doing their jobs. It can be a difficult and challenging job at times. Counsellors in small regional areas report the difficulties in working with a client who may be known to them. It is important that we assist them to handle such situations professionally and with personal detachment.

Yet our services are rarely funded to allow us to provide clinical supervision and we rely on the best will of people in these roles to get by as best they can. Of course we provide guidelines, policies and procedures but these are not a replacement for proper clinical supervision session. We would highly value being able to afford these supports for our staff in gambling services.

(ii) education,

More education about gambling addiction is also needed, similar to campaigns seen with tobacco and alcohol, which are designed to reduce the stigma associated with having a problem and to encourage people to seek help.

This should include enhanced training for gambling counsellors and better integration with other community and health system to improve referral pathways for problem gamblers because most have multiple issues which require holistic support.

While we support uniform accreditation of gambling counselling to ensure a base level of expertise as well as further professional development for counsellors, we do not currently see a need for this to become the sole domain of clinical psychologists, as very effective results have been achieved by counsellors who are not clinical psychologists. As with other community services, these referrals will continue to be an option as part of the continuum of the care provided but it is not required in all cases.

Other services, including health and community services, should be encouraged to include problem gambling in their intake assessments. Without understanding whether there is a gambling problem,

services risk overlooking a potential derailer that can prevent a client from addressing another issue. For instance, a client may be homeless and be a problem gambler. They are unlikely to be able to address their homelessness issue unless the gambling is acknowledged and they can work on that. The first step to identifying gambling is to have indicators of that in the intake assessment.

(iii) self-exclusion;

Self-exclusion programs are also an important element of harm minimisation. There are more than 20 clubs that participate in Mission Australia's Club Help self-exclusion program, which are not only a successful part of helping people with a gambling problem to manage their gambling, but also increase awareness of gambling help services and access to gambling counselling and education programs.

In principle, we support a national self-exclusion program, as it would help ensure that gamblers could not simply go to a different venue from the one at which they are excluded. However, the self-exclusion provisions would need to be rigorous and based on successful programs like Mission Australia's so as not to undermine the good systems already in place.

Terms of Reference: E - Data collection and evaluation issues.

We note the comments of the Productivity Commission on data access problems and the quality of that data. Whilst there is data collected on clients attending problem gambling services, there is insufficient data collected in other health and community services.

Terms of Reference: F - Gambling policy research and evaluation.

As also noted by the Productivity Commission, further research is needed around the actual levels of problem gambling which compares like measurements to get an accurate trend. This should include research into the efficacy of different methods of managing problem gambling.

Mission Australia is currently working with the ANU's Centre for Gambling Research on an evaluation of our ACT gambling counselling services.

Terms of Reference: G - Other related matters.