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Government must drop gambling business: family group

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By Dave Battagello

WINDSOR, Ont. -- Provincial governments must get out of the gambling business because insatiable appetites for revenues are creating more addictions and skyrocketing social and economic costs, says a report by a national marriage and family organization.

With Ontario, B.C. and Quebec recently expanding into online gambling, the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada has not only called for provincial governments to remove themselves from the gambling business, but also to halt gaming expansion.

More than \$32 is spent annually per capita in Canada to help gambling addicts, said the organization's lead researcher, Derek Miedema.

"It's a conflict of interest," he said.

"You can't have whoever is running (gambling) with a profit motive and then paying for responsible gambling. Responsible gambling drops revenues, so it can not co-exist under the same tent."

Governments should instead privatize gambling, tax the winnings, then use those revenues to fund responsible gambling initiatives, Miedema said.

"If governments are bearing the responsibility of (helping problem gamblers) they have to get out from being the provider of the service," he said.

Statistics Canada reported that gambling brought in more than \$13 billion of revenue in 2008. The number of problem gamblers has been estimated in Canada at 3.2 per cent of the population.

But Miedema said statistics in his organization's report show five to 10 people — spouses, family, coworkers — are affected by those with an addiction. The true impact is closer to 12 to 25 per cent of the country's population, he said.

"It's something we as a society need to look at — and that governments need to get out of the business," Miedema said.

Otherwise, the troubles associated with problem gamblers spending dollars at casinos and other forms of gaming, leaving less money to be spent at home will continue to grow.

Problem gamblers often forego the basics such as paying for food, hydro, car payments or mortgages to feed their addictions — with the nation's poor the most vulnerable, Miedema said.

Families with incomes of under \$20,000 also spend more than twice as much on gambling as high-income earners (over \$80,000) as a percentage of income, says the report. It lends "credence that government-run gambling is a tax on the poor," Miedema said.

"They've interviewed children where it was clear the mom who is a problem gambler loves slot machines more than her kids. You can't imagine what impact that has on kids — to see mom spending money on slots when they don't have food to eat.

"Or you have one spouse working long hours to bring money in to support the family and the other spouse spending long hours and money gambling and it creates conflict. It can lead to family breakdown and crisis."

Even though casino gambling has been in Windsor for nearly two decades, the number of bankruptcies, divorces or suicides linked to gambling remains difficult to trace.

Dr. Gina Bulcke, director of clinical services for family and mental health and addictions at Windsor Regional Hospital, said it provides services for 150 to 170 problem gamblers and their family members each year.

She could not say whether the problem was growing with the proliferation of gambling locally and across Ontario, only that "we will continue to monitor it and respond accordingly."

She said two per cent of slot machine revenue is used for treatment of problem gamblers.

Part of the difficulty when measuring problem gamblers is that often they can be linked to other issues such as mental illness, depression, anxiety or other addictions, she said.

"We provide services to meet their needs," Bulcke said. "That's also why we work with the whole family to deal with the impact on them and attempt to rebuild their family life."