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House Bill 2671: Opponent testimony

Subject: My compulsive gambling story and the differences between online and casino gambling

My Story

I am a 44 year old who has battled alcohol and drug addiction for the better part of 30 years. I have experienced physical opiate withdrawal, and nearly died from benzodiazepine withdrawal. I did not think you could get any lower in life until I experienced the grip of compulsive gambling.

The first time I gambled I was 11 years old. My brother-in-law's were both compulsive gamblers, and had regular poker games. I played in a game one weekend, and I won. My \$20.00 had turned into \$100.00. It was like magic.

I gambled again when I was 13 years old. Sadly, I had no problem getting into the Greyhound Race Track in Park City, KS and placing bets. My middle school track coach even went with us one time, and we all pitched in \$6.00 each for a \$24.00 Superfecta box bet. Our 4 dogs all came in, and we won \$1300.00. \$350.00 is a lot of money to a 13 year old! This betting stuff seemed easy.

I would played a lot of poker and made sports bets over the years. I always gambled compulsively, but I made good money and was single through my early thirties. I was relatively successful as a poker player, and I never lost a lot of money. Gambling was not causing problems in my adult life.

I moved from Denver, CO to Wichita, KS in 2011. I left an environment where I played in 3 to 4 poker games a week. If there wasn't a game, I drove to Blackhawk where there are casinos. When I moved to Wichita and got married, the poker fad seemed to fade away.

Fast forward to the summer of 2017. I was very fortunate in life, and I had all the money and possessions one could ever want. There was no need for me to get involved in risky investments. Yet, I couldn't help notice the Bitcoin craze. That same light went off in my head as it did when I was a kid at the dog track: this is easy money!

I started trading Bitcoin online. I got in at the right time and made some decent money initially. Bitcoin crashed in the fall, and I lost a lot more money than I made initially. As a compulsive gambler, I had to make that money up. After all, some had said Bitcoin would go to \$100,000.00 someday.

Bitcoin would crash again, and my mind turned to alternative ways to make up these few hundred thousand I had lost. I had always been a good poker player, and I had heard you could now play online for money. I found globalpoker.com, and not only could you gamble for money, you could buy in for \$5,000.00 at a time and play some serious high stakes poker. I also found there were a large number of online sportsbooks I could use. There were also limitless numbers of online casinos where I could play blackjack for \$250.00 a hand.

I had quick success, and the light again went off in my head. This is easy. There is no reason I shouldn't be winning this money playing high stakes. The faster I made up the Bitcoin losses the better. Then I wouldn't have to explain to anyone what an idiot I had been day trading Bitcoin.

I often won and would be up large sums of money, but I instantly found I could not stay away. In the beginning, I could log off and stay away for a day maybe. But there was always that voice in my head that said you can double what you've won. Why not turn \$20,000 into \$40,000? This is how the chase begins.

When I would return to double my money at the click of a button, I almost always would lose the money I was up, then be fuming mad at myself for losing my winnings. So you buy back in at a click of a button and next thing you know, not only did I lose the \$30,000 I was up, I am now down \$30,000 chasing the initial winnings. All it takes is

one big hand, and I'll get squared back up for the day. It seems perfectly logical in the mind of a compulsive gambler.

I had one particular night that I was on a roll, and was up \$36,000. I lost it all in one hand to a bad call, and I was furious. I had to get that \$36,000 back...how could I be so dumb? I had five different credit cards mind you, but this particular card had just been cleared, and had a \$40,000 limit.

So I began mashing that \$5,000 buy in button, desperately chasing the money lost. I would find out that night that this credit card company had a policy that gave me, as a person with a high limit and great credit, access to double my limit. Hence the erratic chase, and the \$80,000 debt racked up in one night. How this is exactly legal by credit card companies, I don't know. That's a whole other topic around predatory lending, which I hope to address in a different article someday.

Gambling became my life. I usually woke up around 4 am each day and started each day by checking Bitcoin trading. You can trade it 24 hours a day, so there can be significant overnight swings. Then I went straight into playing poker. There were days I never showered or brushed my teeth. I would get the family out of the house and sit on the couch and gamble all day. If I had to drive my kids to school, I played poker the whole time I was driving. I vividly remember not being able to look up from my phone because I was in a poker hand and when I did, I was in the oncoming lane of traffic.

I would pick my kids up late from school because I couldn't tear myself away from gambling to go pick them up. I would look up and it would be time to leave, and I'm in my boxers, not showered, teeth not brushed. I desperately jump in the shower to hose off, thinking the whole time "how in the hell did I do this again??? I was only going to play for a few hours, and then I would"fill in the blank...because it didn't matter. It never got done. I was too consumed by gambling. Suicide was looking like the best option.

I entered a substance abuse program in March of 2018 for my opiate addiction, where the Bitcoin trading and gambling all came to light. I was able to hide it all for almost a year. I was to never gamble or day trade again. I lasted a week before I was again playing online poker, blackjack, and sports betting.

I lost the last of our savings and then I cleaned out my kid's college funds in one day. I will never forget losing one account, thinking I still have two more, and I'm ok. All three accounts were gone by that afternoon. I never intended to take their money, only borrow it. I planned to have the money back in the accounts by the end of the day. Just as soon as I doubled it of course.

Out of money, I began open high limit credit cards. This is the insidiousness of online gaming, and why I firmly stand on the platform of keeping online gambling illegal. I started gambling with money I DIDN'T HAVE.

The disease in the mind never plans on losing. I had every intention of winning all this money back and I would set all these losses straight, I just needed a good run. Every day you wake up to the illusion that today could be my day. My luck has to turn and I will show everybody I don't have a problem I just needed to ride out the bad run.

I remember the day I went totally broke for the first time. I had maxed out my last credit card online, and didn't have a dollar to my name. There is no lower feeling in the world than losing your last dollar. There is no hope, there seems no way out but to eat a bullet.

I never stuck a needle in my arm and looked at myself in the mirror and thought "boy you are winner". But every day you wake up in active gambling addiction you tell yourself today I will be a winner. The illusion is beyond astonishing.

I wish my story ended here, but it is only beginning. I got a loan from my dad to pay off the credit cards. There was absolutely no attitude of changing my ways. To me, this was a clean slate and now I had more credit to work with.

Once the credit was again eaten up, I started stealing loose cash from my kids and wife. I start selling my possessions to fund gambling because that's the only way I can stay in action.

None of this is keeping my gambling addiction fed, so I start making plans to rob people. I can follow people out of banks and rob them at their next stop. It really seemed quite rational to me.

I didn't know it at the time, but my bottom would come on December 19th of 2018. I had sold a watch the day before for \$600. I had the money hidden in a coat pocket. My wife went through the jacket that night and found the money. She took it to try and protect it. When I woke up the next morning at 5am and found my gambling money for the day gone, I went into a rage I had never felt before. She would not give the money back to me, so I hit her to get it back. She wasn't getting between me and my action.

Once again I considered suicide. I thought I had felt low before, but this took the cake. I begrudgingly went to treatment the next day still pissed and blaming everyone else. The denial was still strong that I could gamble again. I couldn't see how I could live life and never gamble again. I worked very hard in treatment though, because I was tired of the prison online gambling created for me. I did not want to lose my family, and it was made clear this was my last chance.

In treatment, the last 1% of my brain and heart was finally convinced that I am 100% powerless over any type of gambling, and I can never do it safely in any manner again. I have been abstinent from gambling since that time. All said and done, I lost about \$2,500,000 due to my gambling addiction. If it wasn't for my father's help, I would likely be bankrupt and on the street. More probable than that, I would be dead. I believe I would have taken my own life had there not been a way out.

Online Gambling Is More Dangerous Than Casino Gambling

This is the grim reality of gambling. It is not hard for me to understand why gambling addiction has an 8 times higher rate of suicide than any other addiction. It is my goal to educate people about the dangers of online gambling because it is different than gambling in a casino for a number of reasons.

The first point I wish to make is the difference between handing over cash for chips in a casino versus buying in online with credit cards. There is no money exchanging hands online, and I do not believe the reality of what you're doing truly sets in. I know that it would be very hard for me to hand over \$50,000.00 in cash to a casino, but it was very easy to press a button 10 times in a night to buy in for \$5,000,00 at a time. There is no connection to the money online like there is with cash in hand at a casino. It is much easier to gamble when no money is directly changing hands. Perhaps I would have lost the same amount of money in a casino. But I can promise you I could not access \$50,000.00 in cash like I could with a \$50,000.00 credit card limit, and I could have never gambled the high stakes with cash that I did with credit. The reality of what you're doing online is very surreal versus watching cash leave your hand in a casino.

Along the same lines, gambling online with credit cards means you can gamble with money you DO NOT HAVE. Yes, you can get a cash advance on a credit card in a casino. But there are serious limits to what you can do with a cash advance off a credit card in a casino. The only limit to what you can do online is your credit card limit. You can max out a credit card online as there are no limits to how much or how often you can buy in. I have maxed out \$40,000.00 credit card limits in one night several times. I could have never done that in a casino. The fact that you can gamble with money you do not have online is extremely dangerous. It lends itself to automatic debt and serious trouble for the compulsive gambler.

My third point deals with cashing out your money online. In a casino, no matter the amount, you take your chips to the cashier and are paid instantly. Online gambling is designed so that the compulsive gambler rarely sees a cash out. All online cash outs are pending for approval. This approval usually takes about three days. As a compulsive gambler, you set up your cash out and leave a playable amount of money in your account. Since the compulsive

gambler cannot stop gambling, the cash out is inevitably cancelled over that three day period once you lose the money left in your account. The design is predatory; it is set up so you never reach the cash out. Many online casinos will limit your cash out as well. For example, the blackjack site I used had a weekly cash out limit of \$6,000.00. When you play blackjack for \$250.00 a hand, it was nothing to be up \$30,000.00 in one session. But you can only cash out \$6,000.00 a week, so the compulsive gambler will lose any and all money above that cash out limit. There is nothing fair about this scenario online. At least in a casino, you are paid out whatever money you have in chips.

My fourth point deals with substance abuse. Many compulsive gamblers are also cross addicted. The rate in the Wichita GA group is about 50%. Casinos provide you drinks to loosen your wallet up a bit. But they will also kick you out for being too intoxicated. You can't sit in a casino and do drugs. Sitting home online, there is no one monitoring the substance use of a gambler. As an opiate addict, I can't tell you how many times I nodded off while being in a poker hand. I could be in a hand for \$5 or \$10k, pass out and wake up to that money gone. Add the lack of monitoring to substance use while online gambling with the fact that you are pressing a button to buy in with credit cards, and this further exacerbates the disconnect between real money exchanging hands in a casino versus the use of credit cards online.

My fifth point deals with the easy access of online gambling. You can be gambling in a matter of seconds online versus having to secure cash and drive to a casino. Yes, many casinos are open 24 hours a day so the anytime access seems the same. But you can gamble online anytime, anywhere. As a compulsive gambler who often was online 24 hrs. a day, I would gamble while driving with my kids in the car. If you think texting and driving is inattentive, try being in a \$10k poker hand while you're driving. I can't tell you how many times I almost got in wrecks while gambling online.

Along the same lines, online gambling is easier to hide. All I had to do was go in a different room in my house to avoid detection by my wife and kids. I could get up, start gambling on the couch, and never take a shower or brush my teeth. Access to online gambling is unlimited. I never had to leave the house and explain where I had been. I would simply put my phone in my pocket when I needed to hide it, then relocate to a different room and be gambling again.

The access to online gambling brings me to my final point. At a casino, I can only play in one poker game at a time. I cannot physically be in two places at once. Playing online poker, I can play at as many tables at once as I feel like I can manage. I am only limited by the number of screens I can pull up on my computer or phone at one time. It was not uncommon for me to sit at 4 or 5 poker games at one time. This only increases the rate of loss for the compulsive gambler. I might be up at one table and walk away, but then I am still sitting at 4 other tables where I will inevitably lose anything I won. Again, there is virtually no limit to what you can do gambling online.

I hope that my story helps legislators understand the damage that online gambling can cause. The vast majority of casino gamblers do it for entertainment and are not compulsive gamblers. I know very few people who sit on their couch and gamble online for entertainment. They go to a casino with a \$100 and leave when they win or lose. Online gambling is designed to isolate the compulsive gambler and allows the use of credit cards to gamble with money you can't payback. Please stop the access to the potential destruction that online gambling presents.

Thank You,

Jason Moeller.