

# Rolling the dice: The high cost of gambling

*Gambling, lottery games prove popular, but can take a toll*

**By Angel Carpenter**

Blue Mountain Eagle

GRANT COUNTY - We've seen and heard the humorous Oregon Lottery commercials touting the latest Scratch-it or Megabucks games. The trendy ads end with a more serious message, read at the speed of light: "Lottery games are based on chance and should be played for entertainment only - not investment purposes."

In Grant County alone, residents have been playing to the tune of more than a million bucks.

From July 2005 to June 2006, Grant County residents spent \$1,763,505 on a smorgasbord of Oregon Lottery games such as Video Poker, Keno, Powerball, Scratch-its and Megabucks. Others might try a myriad of other gambling options like live Texas Hold 'Em or betting who will win the next Super Bowl.

But officials note the not-so-funny side of such entertainment - the trouble that comes when gambling gets out of hand. They see problems affecting not only the person gambling, but their family members as well.

That's why 1 percent of Oregon Lottery proceeds are set aside to help problem gamblers and their families. Harney Behavioral Health in Burns manages a tri-county (Harney, Grant, Lake) gambling prevention and treatment program.

"Approximately 80 percent of the public gambles to some extent," said Thad Labhart, a clinical supervisor for Harney Behavioral Health. Of that group, "2 to 4 percent have a gambling problem."

Are gamblers in it for the money - however small the chance to win the big bucks?

Labhart says no.

"Most people think it's money, but the core problem has to do with emotional issues - escape, restlessness," he said. "Financial problems are typically the symptom."

The financial difficulties that stem from problem gambling can be staggering.

Of the 1,714 clients with gambling problems in Oregon's treatment program (from 2005-06), the average gambling-related debt was \$23,331.

There are other serious consequences which can trail problem gamblers, including having suicidal thoughts, jeopardizing relationships and jobs, and participating in illegal activity to obtain gambling money.

So how does a gambler know when he or she has crossed the line into the problem category? The experts say just two questions can help determine if someone is a problem gambler.

It's called the Lie-Bet survey, and it asks: Do you ever lie about your gambling to anyone? And have you ever bet more than you intended?

Labhart says that answering yes to either question usually warrants further assessment of the person.

Abstinence from gambling is encouraged for people with gambling addiction or those at high risk, but for others, the counselors concentrate on "harm reduction."

"A harm reduction approach typically promotes setting limits on money and time spent gambling," Labhart

explained.

"We acknowledge that most people are going to gamble," he said.

For someone who's had a gambling problem, they need to reduce access to money, credit and gambling opportunities, he said. Then they need to find a replacement for gambling, a positive recreational outlet.

"They also need to address their emotional issues, because that's the root of most gambling problems."

Harney Behavioral Health is also a resource for family members with curriculum to help them deal with their loved ones who have gambling issues.

Labhart listed four ways for families to address a problem gambler:

- Set positive boundaries.
- Monitor finances, limit access to money and credit.
- Encourage the gambler to get help.
- Family members get help themselves.

If the problem gambler doesn't accept that he or she needs help, then Labhart suggests family members get the input of a professional for help in dealing with the gambler.

"Gambling addiction is a family problem," Labhart said.

Free, confidential help is available to any Oregon resident who has a gambling problem or who has a family member with a gambling problem at 1-877-MY-LIMIT.

Online: ([www.ncpgambling.org](http://www.ncpgambling.org))

## (National Council on Problem Gambling)

### **Gambling by the numbers**

Thad Labhart, clinical supervisor for Harney Behavioral Health, shared information about the gambling problem in Oregon through a Powerpoint presentation at a Grant County Safe Communities Coalition meeting late last year. He compared lottery sales in four counties of similar size from July 2005 to June 2006. Among the findings:

- Grant County spent \$1,763,505 at 17 establishments.
- Lake County spent \$1,666,202 at eight establishments.
- Wallowa County spent \$823,824 at 11 establishments.
- Harney County spent \$670,018 at eight establishments.

Labhart said that in 2002, Oregon spent \$1.18 billion on all forms of gambling - 25 percent more than the national average. At the same time, Oregon is recognized as a leader in prevention, harm reduction and treatment for gambling problems.

The average income of gamblers seeking treatment in Oregon is \$36,495, and the average age is 44.6. Of the gambler clients, 47.4 percent are male and 52.6 percent are female. The most popular gambling option is Video Poker (69 percent) which the Legislature

allowed to increase by 20 percent in 2003.

Of those Oregonians who sought treatment, 81 percent of clients reported either no gambling or reduced gambling at six months post-treatment.

During Oregon Problem Gambling Awareness Week, the first week in March, Labhart will visit with Grant County middle-school students to discuss gambling prevention.

---