

Problem gamblers increase with proliferation of casinos

By Stephen Singer, AP

HARTFORD, Conn. – Tom Leksan lost nearly everything when gambling became an addiction with easy access to casinos.

Once an Ohio lawyer, Leksan lost his job and marriage because of gambling, specifically blackjack. He had been gambling for years, he said, but did not become a problem gambler until he became hooked on riverboat casinos in nearby Indiana.

“I think the casinos thrive off the compulsive gambler,” said Leksan, now a car salesman in northern California. “They pay lip service to treating problem gambling, but that’s their bread and butter.”

The unrelenting spread of casino gambling across America is reaping billions of dollars for the industry and government coffers but is also creating more compulsive gamblers. Addiction experts say the sums spent by states for treatment and counseling are too little to keep pace.

Even after the worst recession in decades and during a weak economic recovery, developers are building new casinos and adjoining attractions with the blessings of cash-hungry states. Ohio opened its first casinos last year, casino developers are vying for permission to build three casinos in Massachusetts, and New York City’s new Resorts World Casino at the Aqueduct racetrack is also shaking up casino gambling in the Northeast.

Advocates for an expansion of treatment services point to enormous gaps between the money states are taking in and what they are spending on compulsive gambling. For example, casinos and card rooms in Pennsylvania generated about \$2.3 billion in

revenue in 2010 and the state transferred \$17.5 million in casino revenue into its Problem Gambling Treatment Fund between 2007 and last year.

Connecticut's casinos, off-track betting and the state lottery generated nearly \$659 million in state revenue in 2012 while problem gambling services that include counseling, treatment and a toll-free phone number for gamblers received \$1.9 million.

"Even as you see an expansion of gambling you're not seeing a level playing field in treatment," said Mark Vander Linden, president of the Association of Problem Gambling Service Administrators.

Linden's organization, in a 2010 report, found that 37 states were providing public funding for gambling programs – at a combined total level of just over \$58 million. Nevada alone reported casino and card room gambling revenue that year of \$10.4 billion, according to Casino City's North American Gaming Almanac.

About 2.6 million gamblers characterized as pathological, or unable to resist the impulse to gamble, are estimated to need treatment each year, the Association of Problem Gambling Service Administrators says.

Problem gambling is defined as behavior that causes physical, psychological, social or job disruptions. It is progressively addictive as gamblers become preoccupied with betting and require more frequent bets with more money. It can be as mild as spending too much at a slot machine, card table or convenience store selling lottery tickets or taken to the extreme, compulsive gambling results in overwhelming debt, divorce and sometimes crime such as embezzlement to raise money to pay off gambling debts.

Ray Pineault, executive vice president and chief operating officer at Mohegan Sun in Connecticut, said Mohegan Sun and

neighboring Foxwoods Resort Casino contribute plenty – nearly \$326 million last year as required by their agreement with the state – but the state spends too little to treat problem gambling.

“I don’t think the state does significant funding,” he said.

Rep. Stephen Dargan, the House chairman of the Connecticut legislature’s public safety committee, which oversees the two casinos, said finding money is always a struggle.

“There’s only so many dollars out there,” he said.

In addition, without an expansion in gambling in Connecticut and no Internet gambling, no one is clamoring for more funding. “Everything is pretty much status quo,” he said.

Donald Weinbaum, executive director of the Council on Compulsive Gambling of New Jersey, where gambling has been legal for decades, said the state’s Internet gambling law signed by Gov. Chris Christie in February will lead to a big boost in financing problem gambling programs. Each casino that wins state approval to operate Internet betting will be required to pay \$250,000 a year.

It’s the first time casinos are being forced to pitch in to help finance such services, he said, and will boost current funding of \$850,000 a year for treatment, prevention, education and other services that has held steady for about three years.

Massachusetts state Sen. Stanley Rosenberg, a principal architect of legislation in 2011 allowing up to three resort casinos and a slot machine parlor, said gamblers from his state are spending money in casinos in neighboring states, leaving Massachusetts to treat problems related to their gambling troubles.

“If they’re addicted, they leave their money and come home

with their problems," he said.

Massachusetts nearly doubled its annual problem gambling budget from \$1 million, to \$1.8 million – even before opening the doors to their first gambling hall – but Gov. Deval Patrick cut funding to about \$1.3 million as part of spending reductions across state government.

Keith Whyte, executive director, of the National Council on Problem Gambling, said prevention and education programs have succeeded in reducing problem gambling and keeping the number fairly stable.

"With expansion, I'm not sure we'll ever be able to knock it back down," he said. "This is an addiction where state government is intimately involved and quite complicit," Whyte said.

Part of the challenge in getting funding to treat gambling addiction is its invisibility, advocates say.

"It's a very hidden disease," said Arnie Wexler, a onetime gambling addict and former head of the New Jersey Council on Compulsive Gambling. "You can't see it. You can't smell it. There are no track marks, no dilated pupils."

Treatment options in various states include phone or in-person counseling and public education in schools and churches.

In Connecticut, gamblers can find help at more than a dozen outpatient clinics and in one 20-bed facility where they can stay for up to two weeks for individual and group counseling.

"It's a respite for someone who needs to get out of their environment for a period of time," said Jim Crean, director of outreach and community relations at the Midwest Connecticut Council on Alcoholism.

Gamblers also may have their names included on lists to be kept from entering casinos. In Pennsylvania, 5,111 people have

asked to be on the list over the past six years, said Doug Harbach, spokesman for the state Gaming Control Board. Gamblers who are listed and are caught gambling when they try to cash out their winnings are charged with summary trespass, Harbach said. About 875 violations have been issued.

Another concern is that a rising number of problem gamblers are young. Industry leaders, law enforcement and New Jersey officials gathered in Trenton recently to consider new preventive and treatment ideas to expand services to young at-risk problem gamblers. They emphasized the need to use social media promoting preventive measures at grade school and high school levels.

Gambling therapist Stephen Garbarini said he sees more young people requiring treatment and expects that trend to continue with online betting.

The expansion in gambling in Massachusetts will come with some innovative steps to deal with addiction. One requirement calls for intervention treatment centers at the casinos, a first in the nation, according to Marlene Warner, executive director of the Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling. Gamblers will be able to stop in for advice or referrals.

Casinos also will be required to pay 5 percent of their proceeds from the state's 25 percent tax on gross gaming revenue into a trust fund for programs to prevent and treat addiction and other gambling problems.

"We took advantage of the opportunity to address problem gambling while everybody was paying attention to gambling," Warner said. "There's a lot of prevention work to be done."