

NEWS

Agency expects increase in clients



By [Jason Miller](#), The Intelligencer

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Jason Miller/The Intelligencer - Mary Labine, senior clinical services manager, Addictions and Mental Health Services - Hastings Prince Edward, says the agency is preparing itself to cater to people who may fall into the trap of problem gambling due to the arrival of a casino in town.

BELLEVILLE - When one thinks of addiction, in most cases, drugs and alcohol are the first things that come to mind. For staff at Addictions and Mental Health Services – Hastings Prince Edward, there is another psychological and potentially financially debilitating bad habit that doesn't get as much attention, because people struggling with it, in most cases, keep covering up their losing hand.

The local agency on the frontlines of weaning problem gamblers off their damaging habits is gearing up to meet the need for services once a casino opens its doors here.

Currently handling a manageable case load of clients grappling with moderate to severe gambling issues, Addictions and Mental Health Services – Hastings Prince Edward is on the cusp of launching a campaign tailored to problem gambling to meet the opening of Shorelines Casino Belleville.

The agency runs an open door policy where clients can show up and take advantage of its suite of free counselling and awareness programs, said Garry Laws, the agency's chief executive officer.

"Currently we're not overrun with clients with respect to problem gambling," he said. "We do offer treatment similar to any of our other clinical programs."

Motivational interviewing is one of the first steps toward treatment once a person decides to step through the doors of their Applewood Drive treatment centre.

"We do have a very good set of tools to support them with a treatment plan," Laws said. "We are as current as we can be and we have very good counsellors."

Ontario Lottery and Gaming officials say resources are in place to tackle problem gambling in communities like Belleville where casinos operate, but they have yet to bring any Belleville agencies on board to handle potential cases of addictive gambling.

Addictions and Mental Health Services – Hastings Prince Edward is putting together its own battle plan. "We started putting together a campaign in readiness for this," Laws said. "It's going to go until June of next year. We have been waiting for a bit more activity around the casino, to work with them on ensuring we are available to provide that service, should the need arise."

Last year the province dedicated \$54 million from its roughly \$2 billion in OLG proceeds toward assisting people struggling with problem gambling. Laws' funding comes from that pocket of OLG funds.

"Currently (funds received) is sufficient for problem gambling, today, but will it be enough with a casino coming in?" he said. "I'm not sure, but I probably would venture to say no, but I also can't forecast."

The casino will house a Responsible Gambling Centre.

On a yearly basis, roughly 20,000 excessive gamblers take advantage of the OLG's voluntary exclusion program. For more than a decade, Mary Labine worked with people struggling with problem gambling. She took on the file at a time when the government saw the need for treatment agencies to have designated problem gambling programs. She's witnessed people gamble to the extent that it started to impact their life.

"In my experience, I often seen people with more substantial problems," she said. "A lot tend to be very ashamed if they're having difficulties with gambling."

That comes from gambling not coming out to the forefront as much, "so people tend to think, what's wrong with me?" Labine said.

The degree to which people gamble varies with some resorting to the habit as a means to get away. "Often they will gamble when they're feeling depressed or anxious," he said.

Some are preoccupied with it and feel the need to gamble with increased sums to achieve a level of excitement. "When people lose money they often return the next day to win back the money," she said of them chasing losses. "They can get into a significant financial hole as a result of that. They lie to conceal the extent."

She said the government has played its cards right on creating a variety of avenues, like an on-site centre for people to seek help.

"Ontario has been quite progressive in that area," she said. "Ontario does deserve credit in terms of their multi-prong approach to making sure treatment services are free and accessible to people across Ontario. There is research so we can improve our practises."