

# THE COUNCIL CONNECTION

THE COUNCIL ON COMPULSIVE GAMBLING OF NJ  
**800-GAMBLER®**

*May 2025*

## Message from the Executive Director

### CCGNJ Theme for 2025 Confronts Challenge Of Bringing Hidden Epidemic into the Light

The Council of Compulsive Gambling of New Jersey's 2025 theme is "The Hidden Epidemic: A Public Health Concern." On March 13, as part of the Council's Problem Gambling Awareness Month observance, the Council convened a symposium under this banner. The event centered on the surge of problem gambling over the past six years, spurred by legalized online betting and a blitz of gambling advertising.

The first half of the theme – "The Hidden Epidemic: – highlights a paradox: an issue at once widespread and impacting many, but still not widely recognized or addressed. Disordered gambling is frequently referred to as a hidden addiction, as it has no telltale signs one sees with substance addiction; there are no overt indications of a problem, such as the physical decline or behavioral changes occurring with alcohol or drug dependency.



As we navigate this hidden epidemic, it is crucial to raise awareness, educate ourselves, and confront this issue head-on. Together, we can shine a light on this issue and foster a healthier community for everyone.

The spike in problem gambling to epidemic levels stems largely from the betting apps so many have downloaded to their phones. Access to rapid-fire betting on devices that are never out of reach has given rise to the problem gambling contagion we see infecting much of the country; 38 states and Washington, D.C., have legalized online sports and/or casino betting. Young adults and teenagers, given their ease with technology and fondness for gaming, which is often a gateway to online betting, are particularly vulnerable. This is compounded in young men who have a deep affinity for sports and tend to be risk-takers.

Stigma contributes to the issue of gambling problems remaining in the shadows. Disordered gambling faces a great deal of bias, contributing to attitudes that a person with a gambling problem has only himself or herself to blame. Shame keeps problem gamblers from being open about their issue and seeking help until they reach catastrophic levels, by which time they may have lost their homes, their savings and their families.

The second part of the theme, “A Public Health Concern,” speaks to problem gambling’s widening reach into communities throughout New Jersey and its ramifications for society as a whole. Our state has a problem gambling rate three times the national average, according to a Rutgers University gambling prevalence study. Disordered gambling is often accompanied by mental health issues including depression and anxiety. In the most severe cases, disordered gambling faces the highest rate of suicide ideation among all addictions: 20 percent. Beyond the consequences for the gambler, between eight and ten family members or loved ones of the gambler suffer its effects.

Problem gambling’s fallout includes young bettors amassing crippling debt that compounds what they owe in their college loans, while elderly gamblers erode their retirement savings necessitating their return to the workforce or becoming destitute. In the face of inflation, some turn to gambling as a source of income.

The problem gambling surge that began in 2018 is marked by a troubling demographic shift: for the first time, a majority of calls to the 800-GAMBLER Helpline now come from those 34 or younger. Their introduction to gambling in many cases came in high school or earlier, in spite of the fact that the legal age for opening an online betting account is 21. Part of this underage gambling stems from fathers, older siblings or friends allowing youth to use their accounts. A 2024 study CCGNJ conducted with students at the College of New Jersey found that 76 percent of respondents had their first exposure to gambling between the ages of 5 and 16. (See Link: [TCNJ-2024-Executive-Summary](#))

The Council remains resolute in its mission to confront the hidden epidemic whose public health fallout affects so many. The March symposium advancing our theme was the first of three taking place this year, with northern and southern forums to be convened in summer and fall, respectively. In addition, **the Council’s annual Conference, set for September 19 in Princeton**, will likewise strive to bring problem gambling out of the shadows and have it recognized as a public health matter threatening a growing number of New Jersey families and communities.

**Luis Del Orbe, MPA, CSW**  
Executive Director

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## Governor's Gaming Task Force Issues Report Detailing Enhancements to RG and PG Practices



Governor Phil Murphy on April 21 announced the release of the state’s Responsible Gaming Task Force’s report outlining a comprehensive strategy to address problem gambling and promote responsible gaming (RG) across New Jersey. The Task Force developed the report over 11 months after being established by executive order in June 2024.

The executive order charged the Responsible Gaming Task Force with providing advice and recommendations to the Governor’s Office and the

Attorney General regarding reforms to enhance RG initiatives and mitigate the risks associated with gambling. Impetus to form the Gaming Task Force came in part from findings in a 2023 report from the Rutgers University Center for Gambling Studies citing a

higher risk for problem gambling in New Jersey compared to the national average, particularly for Black and Hispanic residents.

“New Jersey has long been a leader in the gaming industry, and with that leadership comes the responsibility to ensure the well-being of our residents,” said Governor Murphy. “I appreciate the Task Force’s efforts to create a safer and more supportive gaming environment, particularly for our most vulnerable communities.”

“I’m proud that New Jersey is leading the charge in tackling problem gaming,” said Attorney General Matthew J. Platkin (*pictured*), chair of the Responsible Gaming Task Force, whose membership comprises six agencies with gambling oversight. The Attorney General said, “We’re already recognized nationally for our data-driven responsible gaming tools, and I’m encouraged by our multiagency task force’s thoughtful recommendations to take our efforts even further and strengthen support for those who need it most.”

To advance standardization and streamlining, the Task Force recommended the establishment of a board to facilitate all RG grants and funding; a centralized RG website with accessible state resources, which would include links giving individuals the ability to self-exclude from casino gambling, sports wagering, pari-mutuel wagering, and fantasy sports; the standardization of RG rules where applicable; and the creation of standardized RG tools across all forms of gaming. In the spring of 2023, the state established the role of Responsible Gaming Coordinator, a position to which Jamie McKelvey was appointed (to read an interview with Ms. McKelvey, see the Summer 2023 edition of the Council Connection: [Summer-2023-Council-Connection.pdf](#)).

The report examines an array of issues contributing to the state’s vastly expanded gaming landscape. It includes an overview of existing gaming regulations in New Jersey; an overview of RG in other jurisdictions; the impact of gaming on underage and vulnerable populations; education, prevention, and treatment for problem gaming; and funding to prevent and treat problem gaming.

Gambling has increased among all ages but particularly among youth and young adults. Young adults in their early 20s are the fastest growing cohort of gamblers, according to research in the report.

The Task Force cited a 2018 Canadian survey that identified a “pipeline” to youth gambling, with nearly two in three adolescents between the ages of 12 to 18 saying they had gambled or played gambling-like games in the previous year. As is the case with other addictive products (alcohol, tobacco) introduced at a young age, early experience with gambling and gambling-like activities increases the likelihood of developing a gambling problem later in life.

The report detailed the fallout for young gamblers and the enticements that lure them to gambling in the first place: “The consequences of youth gambling can be severe, ranging from financial difficulties and academic decline to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. Many adolescents engage in gambling without fully understanding the risks involved, often perceiving it as a harmless form of entertainment rather than a potentially addictive behavior. The normalization of gambling through advertising, social media, and peer influence further reinforces this perception, increasing the likelihood of problematic gambling patterns emerging at an early age.”

To confront the increase in gambling exposure and problem gambling by youth, the report urged that prevention efforts include gambling education begin as early as elementary school. Legislation (A-1711) has been introduced to require gambling education and prevention in all New Jersey public schools.

The report also examined the issue of gambling advertising, which many regard as excessive and in some cases deceptive. The report requires industry compliance with the Division of Gaming Enforcement’s Advertising Best-Practices, including a prohibition on advertising content suggesting wins are virtually assured (no-risk bets).

Among the marketing issues addressed by the Task Force was the 800-GAMBLER Helpline information required by law to be included in all gambling advertisements. The report found it unacceptable for the 800-GAMBLER Helpline messaging to appear in a “microscopic font” while another state’s RG hotline is prominently displayed in bold, uppercase lettering. Additionally, the report urged operators to allocate a portion of their marketing budgets to promoting RG.

Also noted in the report are a number of recent lawsuits alleging the industry has been lax in implementing RG protections and has targeted problem gamblers through VIP programs that entice excessive betting. Some individuals who have self-excluded from gambling apps or brick-and-mortar casinos continue to receive gambling promotions, which is prohibited.

To view the full Responsible Gaming Task Force Report, please click [Governor's Task Force Report](#).

## CCGNJ Symposium in Trenton Examines Problem Gambling Through a Public Health Lens



*Presenting at the Council on Compulsive Gambling of New Jersey's March symposium on problem gambling and its implications from a public health perspective are (from left) Council Executive Director Luis Del Orbe, Public Health Advocacy Institute (PHAI) Executive Director Mark Gottlieb, and PHAI Director of Gambling Policy Dr. Harry Levant.*

The centerpiece of the Council on Problem Gambling of New Jersey's (CCGNJ) Problem Gambling Awareness Month observance was a symposium themed "The Hidden Epidemic: A Public Health Concern." The forum, which took place in Trenton on March 13, featured prominent gambling reform advocate Dr. Harry Levant, local author Stacy Ladyman, and a panel of individuals with first-hand experience with gambling disorder from both the gambler's and their loved one's perspective.

CCGNJ Executive Director Luis Del Orbe opened the event by urging the attendees to share the information being presented during the day, stressing that the best way to confront the looming problem gambling epidemic is with public awareness. The symposium was the first of three



such events the Council will convene this year to build awareness around the issue.

Dr. Levant emphasized that problem gambling merits the same public health response as other addictions that endanger individuals, families and communities. It is, he said, “a full-fledged addiction just like heroin, opiates, tobacco and alcohol.” He identified a pivotal development in problem gambling being recognized as an addictive disorder: inclusion in the DSM-5, the reference book clinicians use to diagnose and treat behavioral health conditions. Dr. Levant, himself, is a recovering problem gambler.

While behavioral health professionals have recognized the addictive nature of gambling, policymakers for the most part have not responded in the same way. Much of their focus has been on responsible gaming, which places much of the onus on the bettor to monitor his or her gambling and set limits on the amount of money and time spent gambling.

A member of the New Jersey Legislature, Assemblyman Brian Bergen (*pictured, above right*), attended the symposium and was invited to say a few words about his proposal to eliminate online gambling advertising. The Assemblyman said that he, along with many others, regard the amount of gambling advertising as excessive. He reached his breaking point after his 12-year-old son told him he had been on an app providing Bible verses when a DraftKings ad appeared. That prompted the Assemblyman to introduce a bill, A-5207, to ban all online sports betting ads.

Since sports gambling’s legalization in 2018, the volume and misleading messaging of gambling ads has been an issue of great concern to advocates, but they have had little success curbing the advertisements due to commercial free speech protections. This issue and others were addressed in a new report issued by the Governor’s Task Force on Problem Gambling (see story in this issue).

Assemblyman Bergen broached the issue of gambling revenue and its influence on how legislators regulate – or do not regulate – the gambling industry. Online casinos and sports betting have produced a revenue windfall. The influx of gambling revenue into the state Treasury, he said, has muted concern over the fallout from widespread online betting. The assemblyman suggested that if the taxes on gambling were eliminated, gambling would not enjoy such a free hand from lawmakers. He acknowledged the proposal is quixotic given the amount of tax revenue gambling generates.

Another of the speakers, Rob Minnick, has built a large social media following through his posts about problem gambling and the need for reform. Mr. Minnick described the evolution of his own gambling, which went from wagering on his beloved hometown Philadelphia Eagles to placing countless online bets on far-flung sporting events in which he had no rooting interest. Many of his TikTok posts take aim at gambling’s expansion and the barrage of gambling ads that entice youth and make wins seem almost inevitable.

Local author Stacy Ladyman incorporated into her recently published novella a fictional treatment of the impact of her father’s gambling. She described her father as a great outdoorsman, who could survive in the wild through his hunting and fishing ability and know-how. She lamented that, largely because he prioritized his gambling, he never made the time to share that knowledge and skill with her. She observed these were memories that never had the opportunity to form because of his gambling problem.

The afternoon featured a panel of individuals with lived experience of problem gambling (*pictured, below*). Right Choice Recovery Founder Rob Sackowitz was joined by his wife, Sandra, two individuals in recovery from disordered gambling, and the mother of a son with a gambling problem.

Rob recounted his history of problem gambling and the hardship it visited on his wife as well as himself. He expressed his appreciation to Sandra for her support through those difficult days. Recalling the sacrifice required to pay off his gambling debt, he said the couple’s only splurge was a take-out pizza once a week.

Sandra spoke about Rob’s co-occurring alcohol misuse, which continued after he had stopped gambling. She described her denial about the severity of the problem, a common occurrence in the spouses and other loved ones of someone with an addiction.

As Rob attended more 12-step meetings, his recovery strengthened. Eventually, he became an example to others, so much that one in his group asked him to be his sponsor. Helping another problem gambler instilled confidence in Rob and renewed his sense of purpose. He and Sandra eventually opened Right Choice Recovery in Middlesex County, which has become a well-regarded program treating both gambling and substance use.

As the Sakowitz's story illustrates, the harm caused by problem gambling does not befall only the bettor. On average, between eight and ten of a problem gambler's loved ones are impacted. This was an issue another member of the panel, Lisa, a mother of three now in recovery for a gambling problem, knows all too well. She acknowledged the pain her gambling disorder caused her children and husband, posing a question that captured her regret: "What mother gambles her family's life away?"

Gambling was not Lisa's first addiction, though it became her most severe one. Prior to her gambling disorder, she endured a 10-year addiction to prescription opiates. Lisa said ending her opiate use was far easier than attaining long-term recovery from gambling; she stopped using opiates on her first attempt but has had multiple gambling relapses. At one point, she tried to stop betting by self-excluding from gambling apps, only to open accounts in her brother's and father's names.

Through a woman who attends her parents' regular Gam-Anon meeting, Lisa found Right Choice Recovery, which has helped her understand that honesty – with herself and others – was the foundation of gambling sobriety. At the time of the symposium, she was a few weeks shy of her six-month recovery mark, a milestone she hadn't attained previously but seemed poised to reach this time.

The effort to combat the hidden epidemic of problem gambling by raising awareness will continue throughout the year with two more symposia: one in Sussex County this summer and the other in Cape May County in the fall.



## CCGNJ at the 2025 CCGP Statewide Conference East

The Council on Compulsive Gambling of NJ (CCGNJ) was proud to attend the 2025 CCGP Statewide Conference East. This annual event, hosted by the Council on Compulsive Gambling of Pennsylvania (CCGP), brought together industry professionals, researchers, and advocates dedicated to addressing problem gambling, learning more about its impacts, and deepening their understanding of effective support and treatment. CCGP also convenes a conference in western Pennsylvania, which takes

place in Pittsburgh.

The event featured a diverse lineup of presentations, exploring timely issues surrounding problem gambling harms. CCGP Executive Director Josh Ercole (*pictured*) welcomed attendees before introducing the keynote presenters: Jody Bechtold, CEO and Co-Founder of The Better Institute, alongside Ambus Hunter IV, a financial counselor with GamFin. Their presentation, titled, "Gambling Gone Digital: The New Financial Frontier," explored the financial risks of digital gambling, highlighting its impact on individuals and families.



Dr. Holly Sawyer, PhD, delivered a powerful presentation titled "Gambling with Grandma". This addressed the growing issue of gambling addiction among older adults, emphasizing the need for targeted prevention efforts.

In the afternoon, Gregory Krausz, MA, CAADC, LPC, presented "Filling the Gap: Integrating Case Management Services for those with Gambling Disorder". This session emphasized the integration of case management services to enhance gambling disorder treatment.

Closing out the day was Dr. Ken Martz, PsyD, with a session titled "From Risk to Resilience: A Practical Workbook for Gambling Recovery". This presentation provided a practical workbook approach to gambling recovery, focusing on resilience and long-term recovery success.

As the landscape of gambling continues to evolve, conferences like this one are essential in advancing knowledge, fostering collaboration, and strengthening support within the industry. CCGNJ was honored to participate and is grateful to CCGP for hosting such a well-organized and impactful conference. CCGNJ will hold its Annual Conference on Problem Gambling in Princeton on September 19.

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## New Jersey Lottery Partners with CCGNJ On PGAM Awareness Campaign

Legalized gambling should be an entertainment activity that allows players to fit experiences into their disposable-income budget. For some players, regardless of the method in which they participate, gambling can become an addiction. To that end, New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy proclaimed March Problem Gambling Awareness Month (PGAM), and the Council on Compulsive Gambling of New Jersey (CCGNJ) joined forces with the New Jersey Lottery to promote the Council's PGAM theme: "The Hidden Epidemic: A Public Health Concern."



This year's PGAM theme derives partly from the fact that problem gambling is known as the hidden addiction. Gambling disorder, unlike substance addiction, often goes undetected because there are no physical indications of a problem such as physical deterioration or intoxication.

The CCGNJ has reported that calls to its 800-GAMBLER helpline have increased nearly

fourfold since 2018. PGAM is a pivotal month for the CCGNJ in building awareness among Garden State residents about disordered gambling and helping those with a gambling disorder find the resources they need to recover.

CCGNJ Executive Director Luis del Orbe said the Council does not oppose legalized gambling. “We want people to enjoy the activity responsibly in whatever form they desire. We just want to make sure people are able to know when they’ve reached their limit and know to stop when it’s no longer fun. There is no shame in asking for help.”

For its part, the New Jersey Lottery is certified by the World Lottery Association (WLA), the leading organization in promoting responsible gaming practices across lotteries, at the highest level achievable, level 4.

“We don’t just talk about responsible gambling practices in March. We think about it every single day,” New Jersey Lottery Executive Director James Carey said. “It is in all of our interest that New Jersey residents play responsibly and that they know when and where to get help.”

Indeed, the Lottery’s commitment protects the public and ensures that revenues are sustained for the public good. Responsible gaming recertification occurs every three years and must show continuous improvement in the responsible gaming program and Lottery initiatives. Key results of these practices include:

- Hosting a Positive Play Quiz on the Lottery website. The Positive Play Quiz assesses gambling beliefs and behaviors to see if players are creating a sustainable environment and positive gambling experience for Lottery players.
- Conducting interviews with the public to highlight healthy gambling practices while gauging where gaps in education exist.
- Participating since 1999 on the CCGNJ’s Board of Directors.
- Ensuring the CCGNJ’s 1-800-GAMBLER helpline number is printed on all Lottery tickets, brochures, and retail signage and is featured as a tag line on all the Lottery’s radio and television advertisements. The Lottery’s website directs visitors to the CCGNJ’s site, where members of the public can obtain free information and help with problem gambling.
- Providing responsible gambling messaging that adheres to industry best practices. There are four responsible gambling advertisements published quarterly: “Not 18 Yet? No Bet,” “Gift Responsibly,” “Dream Big. Play Responsibly,” and “Pool Rules.”

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## CCGNJ Welcomes Patricia Hall As Education Specialist



The Council of Compulsive Gambling of New Jersey welcomes its newest employee, Rev. Patricia Hall, who fills the position of Education Specialist. Rev. Hall’s primary responsibility with the Council will be to promote the Council’s Cognitive Perspectives Restructuring Program (CPR), a strength-based curriculum offered free to New Jersey adolescents, and make CPR presentations at schools and youth programs.

Rev. Hall, with over 30 years fostering community development, overseeing strategic initiatives, and leading impactful organizations, has a background exceptionally well suited to her new position advancing the Council’s CPR Program. She began her career at the Trenton Free Public Library, where she worked her way up from an entry-level position

to the Executive Director's chair, serving in this role until her retirement. Her leadership was instrumental in strengthening literacy programs, expanding community outreach, and fostering partnerships that enriched Mercer County residents.

Following her retirement from the library, she served in director positions for several nonprofit organizations, further solidifying her commitment to education, engagement, and social impact. Beyond her professional dedication to service, Rev. Hall is an ordained minister and the pastor of ANEW Way Ministries, an online community that provides spiritual guidance and support.

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## CCGNJ Treatment Provider Presenter Series May Schedule

The Council on Compulsive Gambling of New Jersey is offering a series of Provider Presentations. The series, which began in January, will continue into June and offers CEUs for clinicians. Registration information for each of these free Zoom presentations will be sent out a week in advance.

Following are upcoming May presentations:

- 05/09/2025: Kevin O'Neill (*LCSW, LCADC, ICGC2, CEAP, DRCC*) – 'Gambling in the Workplace', 11:00 AM (1 hour)
- 05/16/2025: Fran Gizzi (*LCSW, ICGC2, C-CATODSW*) – 'Gambling and Violence', 10:00 AM (2 hours)
- 05/30/2025: Lorraine Barry (*Ed.S, LMFT, LCADC, ICGC2 BACC*) – 'Gambling and Trauma', 11:00 AM (1 hour)

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## Book a Presentation or Training Session

Would you like for the CCGNJ to visit your or group to discuss gambling and related disorders? Are you an industry leader who would like your employees to receive Responsible Gambling Training? Presentations and trainings can be provided in person or via Zoom. Please contact Luis Del Orbe, Executive Director, at 609-588-5515 (ext. 110) or [luis@800gambler.org](mailto:luis@800gambler.org) to schedule a date.

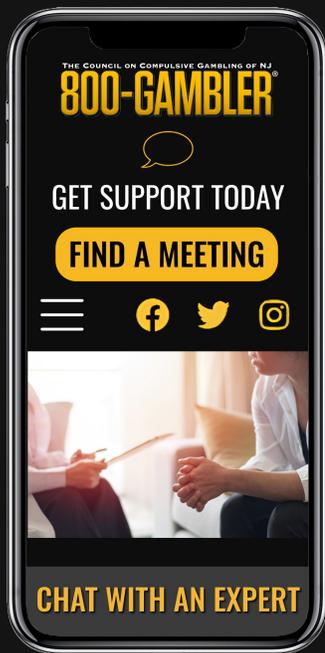
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## Make a Donation

The Council on Compulsive Gambling of New Jersey, Inc. (Council) is a private non-



profit 501(c)3 organization composed of concerned individuals from diverse backgrounds. The group's primary purpose is to represent the best interest of problem and disordered gamblers and their families, recognizing that problem gambling is a treatable condition. The Council is not for or against gambling.

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