

Testimony of Lani Graham, MD, MPH

In Opposition to LD 1164

An Act to Create Economic Opportunity for the Wabanaki Nations Through Internet Gaming

Presented by Representative Rana

Before the Veterans and Legal Affairs Committee, March 31, 2025

Senator Hickman, Representative Supica, and Members of the Veterans and Legal Affairs Committee, my name is Lani Graham. I am a former chief public health officer for Maine. I am from Freeport. I am here in opposition to LD 1164 as a public health expert and as a physician. While this bill is likely a well-intentioned effort to offer new ways of generating money for the Wabanaki nation, it will have unintended and I'm afraid, dire, adverse consequences.

Maine was initially cautious about legalized gambling, but for the past thirty years that caution has been worn away by pleas to support Native Americans or efforts to support horse racing in Maine. Now Maine is poised to expand options for internet gambling one the riskiest forms of gambling from a public health perspective.

Since the Supreme Court lifted a federal ban on sports betting in 2018, these apps have become legal in 38 states, many of which are eager to capitalize on the tax revenue. Even in states like Washington, where sports betting is still only legal in casinos on tribal land, enforcing people's use of these apps is nearly impossible. And many people, including millions of young adults who have never gambled before, are getting hooked. Gambling addiction hotlines and treatment centers say they've seen a huge surge in volume since the ban was lifted. ¹

Ironically having a mental health disorder, like depression or anxiety can make someone more vulnerable to gambling addiction, particularly if they leave the problem untreated. Often, people who engage in compulsive gambling use gambling to escape emotional pain. Gambling also stimulates the brain's reward system, causing a dopamine release and making a person feel confident and happy. The thrill and pleasure of gambling can be addictive and feel like a way to self-medicate.²

¹ <https://rightasrain.uwmedicine.org/mind/mental-health/sports-betting-smartphone-screen-addiction#:~:text=Addictive%20behaviors%20like%20gambling%20can,substances%20like%20drugs%20and%20alcohol.>

² <https://www.gatewayfoundation.org/blog/risk-factors-gambling-addiction/>

Military personnel and veterans are also at higher risk of developing a gambling addiction. One of the common causes of gambling addiction military members and veterans experience is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). According to data presented by the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, veterans being treated for PTSD may be more than 60 times that of same-age members of the general population. Overall, 10% of veterans using Veteran Affairs treatment services engaged in problem gambling.³

It's no surprise that activities we do on our phones can be addictive. It is not uncommon to spend more time on your phone than you expect. One mobile activity, however, can lead to serious addiction and severely impact your life: online sports betting.

If this bill is passed it is virtually certain that Maine physicians and the public health community will find themselves trying to deal with even more young people, especially those with mental health problems, experiencing gambling addiction.

I urge not to pass on this bill. Thank you for your attention.

³ <https://www.gatewayfoundation.org/blog/risk-factors-gambling-addiction/>