

News Article

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Lottery group adopts code

By Evan Bevins

Parkersburg – The state organization representing companies that lease video lottery machines to retailers has adopted a code of conduct for responsible gaming.

The West Virginia Amusement & Limited Video Lottery Operators Association's code of conduct says the group pledges "to our employees, business associates and patrons to make responsible gaming an integral part of our daily operations."

The code says it covers all aspects of the industry and includes members' commitment to support research initiatives and public awareness with regard to responsible gaming.

The group will look at programs already in place and work with organizations like the Problem Gamblers Help Network of West Virginia to craft training for people who deal with customers at video lottery establishments, said Tom Fittro, president of the association. Goals for the regional training events may include helping workers identify problem gamblers and direct them to help in a constructive manner, he said.

"We don't want people coming in thinking they're going to strike it rich," said Fittro, who also is the managing member of Trans-Allegheny Enterprise LLC, a Parkersburg video lottery operator.

"It's another type of entertainment, like going to the movies or bowling. We don't want their mortgage payments. We don't want their car payments."

The operators association represents about 35 companies that lease machines to come 1,600 retailers. Fittro said the association wants to work with everyone from manufacturers to retailers to organizations like the Problem Gamblers Help Network to ensure responsible gaming.

Todd McCay, president of DTC Inc., which owns the City Perk chain in the Mid-Ohio Valley, said he thinks the code of conduct is a good idea.

"We have, from the beginning, encouraged responsible gambling as a retailer," he said.

McCay said if the operators association offered training workshops, he would send managers to them to bring back information to share with other employees.

"It's really hard for us to identify a problem (gambler) in the establishment," he said. "We encourage them (customers) to never wager more than they can afford to lose."

Gary Traugh, who owns Gary's Always Hot Shops in Wood County, said he probably would send some of his employees to such a workshop. The training could provide workers with a way to help customers who are "going beyond their own means" and protect the business, such as by recognizing bad checks, he said.

Video lottery has been a success for the state and businesses, Traugh said.

"Let's be as successful as we can without hurting anybody," he said.

Non-racetrack slots generated \$242 million for the state in fiscal 2004, and operators and retailers made \$137.3 million.

The code of conduct will be posted on a Web site the operators association is building, along with a link to the Problem Gamblers Help Network, which is funded by the West Virginia Lottery Commission.

Thomas Fittro
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“Anything the retailers and operators can do to help get information about our service to their problem players is helpful,” says network director Mia Moran-Cooper. “The call is free. The help is free. Yet not many people take advantage of it.”

A sticker referring players to the Problem Gamblers Help Network hotline, 1-800-Gambler, is required on every machine in the state. The network is funded by the West Virginia Lottery Commission.

Legislators said the code has its good points, but did not see it as a cure all.

“At least for now I think it shows a good-faith effort on their part,” Delegate J.D. Beane, D-Wood, said. “If those type of issues become a problem then the Legislature will also take a look.”

Delegate John Ellem, R-Wood, said the operators association’s idea of training workers is a good step; however, he thought the code of conduct itself said very little.

“If they really wanted to make a statement, they would make a statement on not allowing ATMs (automated teller machines) at those locations, not taking checks,” he said.

In October, 103 people called the Problem Gambler Help Network, and 96 of them identified the type of gambling involved. Seventy-one callers, or 74 percent, cited limited video-lottery – convenient neighborhood clubs that are hard for addicts to avoid.

Patricia Pope, executive director for the operators association, said a study conducted for the association by Marshall University found people of all socio-economic status gamble, and anyone can become an addict.

“It’s not all low-income people using their last dollar to hopefully make their ship come in,” she says.

Gambling can be compared to alcohol, inasmuch as it can be used responsibly or irresponsibly, McCay said.

“There’s still going to be a small percentage of people that ... continue to overstep their boundaries,” he said.

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