

AT THE CAPITOL · STATE SEN. ANDREA L. STILLMAN

This Partnership is a Safe Bet

For several compelling reasons, this year's edition of Problem Gambling Awareness Week—formally launched at a recent press conference in Hartford—is like no other. The event introduced a 30-second public service announcement (PSA) produced by high school students targeting their peers to highlight the dangers of youthful gambling.

The event also marked the 10th anniversary of the Connecticut Partnership for Responsible Gambling, formed to call attention to and combat the ravages of compulsive and addictive betting through statewide awareness campaigns and direct programs to help those who need and seek it.

The PSA, which was produced by students from Masuk High School in Monroe, establishes this year's theme. Its message is twofold; first we want young people to make informed choices about gambling. Second, and just as important, we want gamblers of all ages to know there is help available if their betting gets out of control.

In a society where the proliferation of casinos, sports betting, incessantly televised poker games, and online and Internet gambling has mushroomed, a word of caution is appropriate. This is especially true with young people and even essential in their case, because

so much could be at stake for them: literally their entire future.

The potential downside for risky gambling must be addressed in the same way we caution against alcohol and substance abuse, risky sexual activity, and other inappropriate behaviors.

The state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) administers a range of programs with support from the Connecticut Lottery Corporation and the Connecticut Council on Problem Gambling. These three entities comprise the Connecticut Partnership for Responsible Gambling, which arranged for statewide distribution of the Masuk students' PSA.

Statistics suggest more young people gamble than experiment with alcohol and drugs, yet each form of risky behavior can be tragically addictive and each can be dangerous and costly, especially given the legal consequences of underage participation. It's important to deliver this message to young people because there's a direct correlation between early gambling and problem gambling later on in life, just as there is with early alcohol and drug use and problematic substance abuse later on.

We have reports that children start betting as young as 8 and 10 years old;

it's truly frightening to think these young people might become seasoned gamblers before they are teenagers. In a cooperative effort to prevent this, television and radio stations across the state have volunteered to broadcast this student-to-student PSA all month—the very definition of “public service,” in my opinion.

A few years ago the medical community identified compulsive, destructive gambling and labeled it “pathological gambling.” It must be considered in the same light as any other insidious addiction lurking in Connecticut households. It deprives families of the afflicted of his or her attention; it robs them of economic resources, a particularly ominous consequence in today's world; and it steals from them any sense of dignity and normalcy—cornerstones for satisfying, productive lives.

Pathological gambling is a gravely serious condition; our state's Partnership for Responsible Gambling is just as seriously focused on prevention and treatment of that condition.

Andrea Stillman represents the 20th Senatorial District, which includes New London, Waterford, East Lyme, Old Lyme, Old Saybrook, Salem, and Montville.