**By Mark Kennedy**

**Montana Council of Problem Gambling**

As we finally emerge from a long winter, I felt it was time to update the tavern and gaming industry on the Montana Council on Problem Gambling (MTCPG) and relate some of the Council’s new challenges and concerns.

The brief history of the Council dates back to the fall of 2000, when the industry recognized a need to take a proactive approach in response to calls within the Legislature to create a new government program to address the problem gambling issue.

A couple of referendums had also been run unsuccessfully by Don’t Gamble With the Future, an organization that wanted a government program to increase regulations, taxes, and oversight on the gaming industry in Montana, and to fund a state-run program to address problem gamblers in our state.

In response, industry leaders – primarily from the Montana Tavern Association (MTA), the Gaming Industry Association (GIA) of Montana, Town Pump, and the Montana Machine Coin Operators Association (MCMOA) – created a private, nonprofit foundation that could create a network of Licensed Addiction Counselors (LACs) across our state that could take on additional licensure and become the visible leaders on the issue of problem gambling.

Funding for this mission now comes solely from industry sources, including the MTA, the MCMOA, Town Pump, Century Gaming, IGT, Amusement Services, and the Montana Lottery through its contract with its national vendor, Interlot Inc.

Individual companies have also added to the industry’s commitment as well. Century Gaming and their locations have created a “per machine” contribution in addition to its annual contribution, allowing a reserve fund to be created for special projects. This special fund provides the Council a cushion in its budget it has never had before.

Amusement Services has helped with printing, artwork, and display materials for the Council’s bi-annual conferences.

Town Pump has provided help in getting our message out to legislators and elected officials by assisting in the sponsorship of those conferences. All these extra monies allow more of the core contributions to be used for the stated mission of the Council: to alleviate gambling-related social and personal distress through the provision of relevant support, referral services, and education to compulsive gamblers, their families, and other concerned Montanans.

The issue of problem gambling has continually surfaced in debates locally and in Washington D.C. With the advent of online access to internet gambling, the cry to address problem gambling has ballooned into a full-time debate among lawmakers, industry representatives, local governments, insurance companies and mental health experts.

With the passing of the Affordable Care Act, and the allowance of gambling being recognized as an addiction and a mental illness, the waters have become muddier for the Montana Council on Problem Gambling as it continues its mission.

The Department of Corrections sponsored a bill in the last Legislature to create regulations for licensing counselors. The Legislature passed the bill with support from the tavern and gaming industry. The Department of Labor and Industry has established and now is implementing rules to regulate counselors.

Currently, the MTCPG is focused on creating the standards of education for the Licensed Addiction Counselors (LACs) in Montana who want to include gambling addiction treatment into their practice. The standards will accomplish two things. First, it will provide Montana LACs a clear picture of what they need to do to become licensed and adept at recognizing and addressing problem gambling in their patients. Secondly, it will bring Montana LAC standards in line with the national guidelines for the mental health counseling.

So, this has been a long journey for all of us in the tavern and gaming businesses, legislative groups, and the state’s LACs. The Council’s board has worked within the budgeted funds supplied by our benefactors, while searching for other sources of revenue through grants or federal programs. The Council has also contacted the Sovereign Native Nations in Montana in an effort to extend its problem-gambling network.

The rates paid to the counselors in our network of providers have never increased in the life of the program, which began in early 2001. We need to bring those rates in line with other addiction counselors in order to keep the program viable and productive. In fact, our compensation rates are the lowest in the nation.

I will be approaching the boards of our benefactors in the next few months to request an increase in the amounts provided to the MTCPG to bring us in line with other states, and to encourage their membership to follow suit.

This is ***your*** program, and it has enjoyed success thanks to your generous and continual patronage. It is a great program, nationally recognized as a leader in how to approach problem gambling on a broad horizon.

Leadership in the industry has always anticipated well the changes in its business environment. I am asking for some of that foresight in this request. Your input is our direction.