

If not us, who? Without you, how?

Someone needs to tell them!

Norma Astourian called the NCALG office this week from Detroit, furious, frustrated and wanting to know what to do next. She's a compulsive gambler, though she considers herself more of a victim – a victim of government and commerce gone wrong. She wants to start a movement, a program, or maybe fire up a foundation, but she is flat broke -- her fortunes sucked down the relentless vortex of gambling.

She's part of a thriving Armenian ethnic group, vibrant people and fun loving. She says she and her friends used to go to Las Vegas a couple of times a year, and that was no problem. Many of her friends and church members did that. Trouble started when gambling came to Canada, just 20 minutes "across the bridge," and when casinos opened in Michigan, Norma became a textbook case of the proximity effect. Her trips became more frequent until her spare-time thoughts filled with gambling, and her passion would take her to the casinos at any time of the day or night. To her, the addiction came without warning, aided and abetted by government and business she thought she could trust.

"We need to be telling people," she fumes.

The gambling industry insists "most Americans gamble responsibly," meaning, I suppose, that Norma is "irresponsible." She blames the casinos, and her state government. Her story made the *Detroit News* last week, and she says her phone is ringing off the hook. She says there are untold thousands of gambling victims like her in Michigan alone.

In truth, Americans don't understand the power of gambling addiction. It's an addiction that strikes an alarming percentage of adults and even double the percentage of teenagers, infecting people from all walks of life. It's a hidden addiction. People don't come to work or school with dice on their breath.

The gambling industry's front organization, the American Gambling Association (AGA), released their "State of the States" survey this month extolling the wide acceptance of gambling in America. The survey claims the majority of gamblers set a budget, half of them of under \$100 per gambling trip. They fail to mention the majority of their profits come from about five percent of their customers, the compulsive and problems gamblers. Without those victims, the casino industry would most likely crumble. It's not the "average" \$100 customer that fuels this monster; it is the life's work, savings and homes of people who are hooked.

Norma's story is typical. In her own words, "I lost my life – my future. I'm 57. Everything you could work for all your life is gone. . . . This product needs to be pulled off the market." She's serious when she says she's lost her life to gambling. "Our politicians have turned into morticians" she says.

The AGA study claims acceptance of casino gambling is on the rise. They contend 85 percent of Americans now believe casino gambling is "perfectly acceptable for themselves or others."

Can you name one single product on the American market that injures anywhere near the number of users that gambling does? Just how "acceptable" can a product be that ruins or damages the lives of five or six percent of its

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customers? A Nevada study published this spring noted as many as 3.5 percent of that state's adults are ADDICTED to gambling and nearly another three percent are problem gamblers. More than half the compulsive gamblers in that study committed crimes to support their addiction, explaining handily why Las Vegas has one of the highest incarceration rates in the nation. A good many of those people started out as ordinary Americans, until this addictive product ruined them.

The AGA claims its members have created 350,000 jobs with wages of \$11 billion and taxes of \$4 billion. They failed to mention that gambling is parasitic, causing the elimination of an equal number of jobs. They neglected to show that for every tax dollar state and local governments receive, they have to spend at least \$1.90 in social costs.

Other reports this year indicate total annual gambling social costs cresting above \$40 billion! An industry contributing to that kind of damage can hardly boast about its \$4 billion tax bill.

Norma, in Detroit doesn't think those numbers are "perfectly acceptable," and neither do most Americans. If we polled Americans right now about whether they feel they have enough gambling, I guarantee we'd win. A *Chicago Tribune* poll this month showed a two-to-one majority of citizens rejecting proposals for a Chicago casino as well as plans for more riverboat casinos and video poker machines in bars and restaurants. Why are they opposed? Because they have seen enough of the addiction, bankruptcy, crime and corruption caused by the existing casinos.

If gambling was such a great product, it would be flying off the shelves. It's not. This year nearly 30 states considered expansion of gambling, and have decided against it. In Iowa, the Iowa Great Lakes Quality of Life organization led the charge as voters in Dickinson County turned down more gambling by a 72 to 28 percent margin. That rejection rate will hopefully carry over into Maine and Colorado in the coming November elections.

That's what happens when Americans know the facts. Like Norma said of Detroit, "Someone has to tell them!"

That is the task at hand. The AGA and the industry it represents are spending millions of dollars on studies, tainted research and public relations. They are gaining ground among our young citizens. We have our work cut out for us.

This spring and summer have been a flurry of trips, conventions, organizing meetings, press conferences and legislative meetings as we have struggled to stem the tide of gambling. So many states were looking toward gambling to solve their budget problems, all on the backs of people like Norma – honorable, ordinary citizens who became victims of an industry that cares more about profits than human pain.

Against great odds, we've done well so far this year. The Maryland press noted gambling interests outspent the grass roots opposition by more than a 50-to-1 margin, and the people still won.

That is good, but the battle still rages. Gambling interests are already pressuring politicians for special sessions, referenda and new bills to be considered after state legislative recesses. The battle is not over. The greed that drives gambling expansion is voracious.

We make a difference by telling the truth, a letter, a speech, a meeting, a paragraph at a time. We need to get the truth to more people. We need to travel more. We need to send more mailings. We need to expand our Internet presence. We need to offer more help.

We need your help to get that done. Please use the enclosed card to send your contribution.

Please give generously, today! We will spend your money effectively, helping all Americans to choose wisely.

And just as important as your contribution is your voice. Share our newsletters with friends, and use your influence to make a difference.

Go Tell Them!

Tom Grey

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