

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Re: Interactive Gambling Amendment (Sports Betting Reform) Bill

Dear Secretary

Mission Australia is a national non-denominational Christian organisation that delivers evidence-based, client-centred community services. Our goal is to reduce homelessness and strengthen communities across Australia. In the 2014-15 financial year we supported over 307,000 Australians through 589 programs and services including gambling counselling services (NSW), financial counselling, homelessness services and other casework services where problem gambling often arises as an issue of concern.

We are writing to the committee to support the intention of the *Interactive Gambling Amendment (Sports Betting Reform) Bill* in introducing harm minimisation measures to help individuals who are engaged in online sports betting to control their gambling more effectively.

We are concerned about the impact of problem gambling, including sports betting, on individuals and communities and have consistently called on the Government to take action to introduce effective harm minimisation measures. We believe this Bill makes an important contribution towards the objective of responsible gambling. We suggest that any measures introduced be regularly evaluated and amended as necessary to effectively target problem gamblers and reduce harm.

Our gambling counsellors have noted a growing problem in sports betting, particularly among young males. Research confirms that sports betting has grown substantially and is emerging as a significant contributor to problem gambling, especially among younger adult males. Our counsellors further report that the availability of credit and inducements frequently exacerbates these problems. This Bill is intended to reduce harmful gambling through prohibiting inducements, offers of credit and micro-betting practices. These measures would be particularly useful, given that the Government has not yet implemented its stated policy of prohibiting credit exemptions.

Online sports betting is a big problem with Gen Y males in this area. One or two have said "It's like it is not real money until I get my credit card statement". It is hard for them to watch a game of football without being bombarded with sports betting advertising.

Mission Australia Gambling Counsellor, Campsie NSW

While problems related to poker machines remain the primary issue for most of our clients, sports betting has become more prevalent in recent years. Clients experiencing problems with sports betting often complain about the saturation coverage that gambling advertising receives during sporting events, which combined with 24 hour a day access via the internet makes giving up extremely difficult.

Further, children's exposure to sports betting and advertising is particularly concerning as watching sport and betting have become so intertwined. Research into the advertising of other harmful products suggests advertising increases uptake and consumption, especially among adolescents. We therefore support the Bill's inclusion of a prohibition on broadcasting a restricted wagering service advertisement in Australia during a G classified television program or during a television program that consists of coverage of a sporting event. This is also consistent with the Liberal Party's *Helping problem gamblers* policy which committed a Coalition Government to legislating to control gambling advertising if current self-imposed industry regulations prove ineffective.

The provisions of the Bill around a self-exclusion register and regulator are also supported, so that problem gamblers are assisted to quit when motivated to do so. Regulations that minimise harm can prevent sports gambling growing into a larger problem as the industry grows. Similar schemes were recommended in relation to poker machines by the Productivity Commission and the Coalition has supported a national voluntary pre-commitment program for electronic gaming machines. A self-exclusion register for online sports gambling and independent regulator is consistent with this harm minimisation framework.

Several clients have explained to me that they are often offered amounts ranging from \$50-\$2000 if they match the betting amount, even when they have previously requested to close their online betting accounts. These inducements have often triggered further gambling episodes.

Mission Australia Gambling Counsellor, Wollongong NSW

We know from our service experience that clients with gambling problems experience not only financial crisis, but relationship breakdown, homelessness, depression and even suicide. Problem gambling can cause disruptions in any and all major areas of a person's life including psychological,

physical, spiritual, social or vocational problems. The impacts of problem gambling also extend beyond the individual to the person's family and community.

Other non-gambling related services have also felt the impact of problem gambling including sports betting. For example, at Triple Care Farm, Mission Australia's youth specific drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre, there has been a sharp increase in the number of young people identifying concerns with problematic gambling, jumping from 10% in 2014 to 25% in 2015.

Homelessness services are also feeling the brunt of problem gambling. Data from specialist homelessness services in 2014-15 showed that among those clients who required gambling counselling (less than 1% of clients), the level of unmet need was substantial – around 27%. We are also very cognisant of the higher impact of problem gambling on regional and remote parts of Australia.

Mission Australia conducts an annual *Youth Survey* of people aged 15 to 19 to understand their concerns. In 2015, gambling was a major concern for 3.3% of young people and was more likely to be a concern for males (4%) than females (2.5%). When analysing the 2014 *Youth Survey* data to look more closely at young people experiencing disadvantage, we found that gambling was more likely to be a concern for young people in low SES areas than young people in high SES areas. Also, it was more likely to be of concern to young clients of our services than to young people who were not Mission Australia clients. Half (49.0%) of those highly concerned about *alcohol* and *drugs* also expressed heightened concern about *gambling*, compared to a very small minority (1.1%) of those with little to no alcohol and drug concerns. These findings paint a picture of a certain group of disadvantaged young men (and some young women) facing challenges of a low SES background and alcohol and drug concerns, for whom gambling is an added vulnerability.

In light of the significant impacts of problem gambling, particularly on those facing disadvantage and with complex needs, Mission Australia supports efforts aimed at harm minimisation including greater regulation of sports gambling. Such measures are an important complement to other gambling legislation reforms and to gambling counselling and other social services that support problem gamblers to address the impacts of their gambling for themselves, their families and their communities.

We would be happy to discuss our concerns and experiences further with committee members should this be useful to consideration of the Bill.

Yours sincerely

Catherine Yeomans
Chief Executive Officer, Mission Australia

13 January 2016