



St Vincent de Paul Society
NATIONAL COUNCIL
good works

St Vincent de Paul Society

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Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Gambling Reform Inquiry into pre-commitments scheme, 2011

The St Vincent de Paul Society seeks to shape a more just and compassionate Australia. The Society seeks a more equitable social order. Our international constitution states the “The Society is concerned not only with alleviating need but also with identifying the unjust structures that cause it.” The St Vincent de Paul Society must struggle for justice, rather than simply delivering charity.

We are constituted as an organisation of ordinary Australians who stand with the people who have been pushed to the margins of Australian society. We are committed to an Australia characterised by fairness and inclusion. We have long advocated for significant structural change in order to address the causes of social and economic inequality. We also contend, from our experience at the coalface, that a nation such as ours is well-resourced to put in place measures to ameliorate many of the factors contributing to, or exacerbating, social exclusion and marginalisation.

Problem gambling is an example of one of these factors.

The St Vincent de Paul Society is deeply concerned about the negative impact of the Poker Machine Industry, especially on low to middle income households. This is well documented:

“The harms from problem gambling include suicide, depression, relationship breakdown, lowered work productivity, job loss, bankruptcy and crime. For example, a 2008 survey

found that gambling was the most common motivation for fraud and that the average loss was \$1.1 million per incident.... When these costs are accumulated across people with significant problems they amount to some \$4.7 billion annually using conservative estimates.” (Productivity Commission)

We completely reject any approach to this problem that seeks to demonise or discriminate against people on low incomes. We are opposed, therefore, to approaches that target people who are already doing it tough. This is why we are supportive of a binding pre-commitments scheme, applicable to all electronic gaming machine users. While we do not believe that this measure, in isolation, will address all the problems associated with problem gambling, we do believe that this is an intelligent and meaningful mechanism for harm-minimisation.

We do not adhere to a blanket critique of all gambling. “The much higher public safety risks posed by gaming machines warrant more active community awareness, prevention and harm minimisation measures targeted at this form of gambling than safer forms, such as bingo or lotteries.” (Productivity Commission)

We subscribe to the analysis that this is a systemic problem and that the harm done by poker machines can be minimised by a number of measures. We embrace the harm minimisation approach to this and other social problems. By *harm minimisation* we mean an approach that considers the actual harms associated with a particular practice and how these harms can be minimised or reduced.

We accept the position expressed by the Productivity Commission that “Gaming machines are the prime source of problem gambling in Australia...” and that “Regular gaming machine players (those playing at least once a week) are estimated to spend on average around \$7000 – 8000 per annum, a sizeable share of household incomes, and a key source of harm to some.”

We continue to advocate for a more comprehensive investment in social infrastructure. We believe that access for all people to appropriate and secure housing, healthcare, education and training, transport, employment, social support services, sports and recreation and social connectedness are essential to any genuine attempt to address problem gambling. We do not accept that this social problem can be viewed in isolation from the social and economic contexts in which it is found. As the Productivity Commission points out: “Some communities face widespread problems stemming from poverty, poor health, low social and human capital, rundown or missing local community resources, substance abuse and crime.....These community traits can concentrate risks of problems with gambling...”

We support the recommendations of the Productivity Commission:

- 1 “The amount of cash that players can feed into machines at any one time should be limited to \$20 (currently up to \$10,000).

- 2 There are strong grounds to lower the betting limit to around \$1 per 'button push' instead of the current \$5-\$10.
- 3 Shutdown periods for gaming in hotels and clubs are too brief and mostly at the wrong times. They should commence earlier and be of longer duration.
- 4 Better warnings and other information in venues would help.
- 5 Relocating ATMs away from gaming floors and imposing a \$250 daily cash withdrawal limit in gaming venues would help some gamblers.
- 6 Problem gambling counselling services have worked well overall. But there is a need for enhanced training and better service coordination."
- 7 Mandatory Pre-commitments.

We understand that Government has committed to introducing a full pre-commitment scheme by 2014, poker machine warnings and "cost of play" displays and a \$250 daily ATM withdrawal limit in venues with poker machines, except casinos. We welcome this commitment but believe that these changes need to be introduced with greater urgency. We base this view on the human suffering we are witnessing each day on the ground.

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