

Dear Mr. Frank,

Aug 6, 2010

Though not your constituent, I write you in your position as Chairman of the House Financial Services Committee. A recent article about a new proposal to legalize internet gambling in America (outlawed several years ago) quoted you to the effect that government should not regulate the behavior of individuals if the adverse consequences of that behavior fall only on the individual. Further, you seemed to be saying that since illegal internet gambling persists among U.S. residents the government is foolishly missing a chance to take its cut of the action. These are not your exact words, but it's the gist.

As you and your committee think about this, please keep forward in your minds that for a small proportion of gamblers, variously estimated at let's say 1.5% of the total population, gambling is an addictive disease that will devastate not only the gambler but his or her family and business associates. Unless they inherited wealth, addicted gamblers always resort to abused dollars, either stolen outright or diverted from another use like paying the mortgage on the family's house. Gambling does no less harm to American society than parenteral drug abuse, although it can be made to look better by extolling revenues it can bring to governments by taxes or PILOT.

When gambling is "legalized" so that government shares, government gets addicted to the revenues, now having an interest in maximizing them by either running the game itself (e.g. state lotteries) or encouraging proliferation of (let's say) internet gambling. Our federal and state governments admittedly count on revenue from taxes on tobacco and alcohol, in that sense are already dependent on these industries. At least, however, when governments look to boost revenue therefrom, they raise the excise rate; they don't vote to make cigarette machines more accessible to minors. They don't throw away warning labels. They don't debate opening more bars to make it easier to get a drink or slacking off on ID checks. They don't promote addiction.

Many people speak of government revenues from legalized gambling as "sucker tax" or "sin tax" or "stupidity tax," as if virtuous people are relieved of some tax burden by the "sinner's" pay-in. All these cynical phrases overlook the reality that the individual gambler who drops that cash is likely ruining more than one life. No gambler is an island. The sucker being taxed here is also the caring spouse who holds to the marriage vow or the long-time business partner who can't believe the new audit. In 2010, we call addiction a disease over which the person has no control; phrase-users should replace "sin tax" with "disease tax."

Yes, our government needs money; yes, Americans are illegally moving money through internet gambling even now; NO to government's self-interested encouragement of addiction to "remedy" the first two problems.

If your committee holds hearings about this I beseech you to schedule representation from a national group like Stop Predatory Gambling. www.stoppredatorygambling.org

Sincerely

Stephen Q. Shafer MD, MPH

Clinical Professor of Neurology at Harlem Hospital Center, Columbia University (retired)

8 Mynderse Street Saugerties NY 12477 845 246 4947 sqs1@columbia.edu or shpcount@earthlink.net