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TO: Board of Health for the City of Ottawa Health Unit

DESTINATAIRE : Conseil de santé de la circonscription sanitaire de la ville d'Ottawa

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SUBJECT: REDUCING THE HARMS FROM GAMBLING IN OTTAWA: PROGRESS
REPORT TO THE BOARD OF HEALTH

OBJET : RÉDUIRE LES MÉFAITS LIÉS AUX JEUX DE CHANCE À OTTAWA :
RAPPORT D'ÉTAPE AU CONSEIL DE SANTÉ

PURPOSE

The purpose of this memo is to update the Ottawa Board of Health on the ongoing collaborative work of Ottawa Public Health (OPH) within the Ottawa Gambling Harm Prevention Network (OGHPN). The OGHPN was established at the direction of the

Board of Health and is comprised of people with lived experience, treatment service providers, researchers, industry partners and other community leaders and stakeholders working to decrease harms and increase wellbeing in relation to gambling.

BACKGROUND

Protecting and improving wellness in Ottawa in relation to mental health, including risks associated with gambling and gambling disorder, remains a priority in the OPH strategy. Aligned with the Board of Health's vision for Ottawa, the OGHPN was established to promote collaboration to decrease harms and increase wellbeing for people who gamble, their families and communities.

Risk of harms related to gambling include: financial difficulties; concurrent harm from substance use and alcohol; strain on family and social relationships; and mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and suicide. In 2020, it is estimated that approximately 16,600 Ottawa residents, or 2% of the population aged 19 and older¹, experience moderate or more severe problems related to gambling. However, the number of people receiving support for gambling is much lower, with about 890 people reported to be receiving treatment or only 5% of those likely experiencing harms (2020/21).²

In August 2013, the Board approved a report on the [*Health and Social Impacts Related to Problems with Gambling in Ottawa*](#). The report highlighted existing gaps in prevention and treatment services and identified a need for a coordinated, locally focused approach and increased funding to support comprehensive work to prevent gambling related harms, including funding to local treatment services, prevention and outreach initiatives.

Subsequently, in 2018 the Board of Health approved a report titled [*A Public Health Approach to Reducing Harms from Gambling in Ottawa*](#), a five-year multi-stakeholder action plan to address the harms related to gambling in the community. The action plan comprised four elements:

1. Establishing a network to collaborate across sectors to reduce harms related to gambling;
2. Increasing awareness about the harms related to gambling, early warning signs and informed decision-making about gambling;
3. Working with community partners to reach groups at higher risk of harm from gambling and increasing knowledge of local treatment options; and

4. Monitoring harms from gambling in Ottawa.

The Board's approval of this report led to the formation of the OGHPN. Since then, OGHPN members have worked collaboratively to pursue the corresponding four-point plan. The current memo provides an update on this work and presents planned future directions for continued action to support people in Ottawa. This memo also supports OPH's 2022 Strategy with respect to promoting mental health and substance use health and describes work to influence the social and physical environments that support health and well-being.

DISCUSSION

In Ottawa, community need in relation to mental health and substance use health is increasing and, for over a decade, treatment service providers have been under pressure to provide support without additional funding or resources for gambling treatment. Early indicators show the impact of the pandemic on personal and financial wellbeing, and online gambling correlated with higher risk gambling³. However, evidence is mixed regarding long-term impacts on overall rates and risk, requiring further investigation and strategic response for individuals who may be at higher risk, for example young males and those with a history of experiencing harm from gambling⁴. The recent (2021) expansion of gambling opportunities to online and single sport and event betting could further impact health and social wellbeing for some people who gamble, their families and communities⁵. Evidence cautions that recent changes in legalized online and single sport and event betting may increase risk, harms, and the need for support⁶. The full impact of the pandemic and of the expansion of regulated gambling may not be fully known for some time. A public health approach to gambling seeks to prevent or mitigate gambling-related harm, promote lower risk gambling, and protect vulnerable or high-risk populations⁷.

Progress from 2018 to 2022 on the Four-Point plan

1. Establishing the network:
 - a. The OGHPN was established in June 2018 and meets quarterly (except between June 2020 to May 2021 due to the pandemic).
 - b. Network members have worked collaboratively to further the goals of the network, build partnerships, and advance the Network's Action Plan. Some key initiatives include:

- i. An OGHPN member agency, the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation (OLG), has received and implemented the recommendations of people with lived experience to improve the self-exclusion program offered by online and in-person venues.
 - ii. In response to recommendations from people with lived experience, OGHPN members, the OLG, treatment providers and credit counsellors have worked together to increase the number of sites able to facilitate self-exclusion in Ottawa.
 - iii. OGHPN member treatment providers have worked with a local system navigation and referral service (AccessMHA) to include screening for gambling harms and disorder.
- c. An evaluation involving a 2021 survey of network members indicated that members found value in the network's collaborative work and relationship building and that the network helped with setting priorities for concrete actions and outcomes.

2. Health Promotion and raising awareness:

- a. In response to the possibility of increased risk from gambling during the pandemic, OPH provided the Ontario Minister of Health with recommendations to limit the nature and frequency of online gambling advertisements, restrict advertising that portrayed gambling as a solution to social, personal, or financial problems or as a solution to boredom, and require gambling websites to contain signposted information on helplines/resources that are actively promoted and visible.
- b. In consultation with the OGHPN, OPH submitted recommendations to the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario (AGCO) on proposed legalization and regulation for online gambling and single sport and event betting.
- c. An OGHPN member agency, the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA), developed the world's first 'Lower-risk gambling guidelines'. These guidelines are being promoted on the OPH website and OPH social media on behalf of the OGHPN and some members are sharing via social media to extend the reach.

3. Outreach to people at higher risk of harm:

- a. OPH, along with members of the OGHPN, hosted collaborative learning workshops with 35 community organizations, which represented groups at higher risk of harm from gambling (i.e., crisis services, mental health walk-in counselling, social services, credit counselling, older adult and youth mental health agencies, and agencies supporting youth involved in the justice system). This project, which included a wide range of intermediaries supporting high-risk groups, aimed to increase the intermediaries' awareness of harms associated with gambling and to increase the Network's understanding of these agencies' information needs and how to best reach groups at higher risk of harms from gambling. For example, the Distress Centre of Ottawa identified a knowledge gap in their call centre volunteers. This was addressed through a gambling harms prevention in-service training for call centre volunteers, which was provided by a local treatment provider. Themes identified included: stigma; lack of public awareness that gambling can become a serious problem for some people; lack of awareness of the importance of gambling treatment in recovery and that family and friends are crucial to recovery; and individuals participating in treatment groups do not reflect the diversity of the community. Lessons learned from these sessions informed future outreach activities and awareness sessions.
- b. OGHPN member treatment providers have established a local community of practice on supporting people and families impacted by harm from gambling. In addition to ongoing information sharing and the opportunity for professional consultation, this group of treatment providers engages in collaborative actions such as recently supporting the local referral and service navigator, AccessMHA, to add harms related to gambling to their screening and referral process.

4. Monitoring and surveillance:

- a. Annually, the Network reviews and revises its Action Plan, as needed, which includes performance measures. Through this process the Network members collect, analyze and share information on key indicators (e.g. number of treatment / community based self-exclusion sites) on the Network's progress to achieve its goal to prevent harms from gambling
- b. In partnership with OPH, and with access to the Statistics Canada Research Data Centre, a surveillance project will be undertaken to gain a more comprehensive assessment of local need and activity related to gambling,

including examining sociodemographic factors and people at higher risk of harm.

- c. In consultation with the OGHPN, and in alignment with provincial recovery tables and Ontario Health Teams, OPH will include gambling-related harm indicators in a local 'Substance use health and mental health dashboard'.

NEXT STEPS

Members of the OGHPN expressed a unified desire for continuing to identify specific actions that decrease harms from gambling. The emerging and ongoing work being prioritized by the network for the next year includes:

1. Continuing to improve support for people who choose to self-exclude and those who seek support with treatment

The improved self-exclusion program, informed by consultation with people with lived experience, is expected to launch in September 2022. Additionally, service providers have worked with the OLG to establish more sites to support people to self-exclude outside of gambling venues (i.e., with their treatment provider). The Network and dedicated self-exclusion working group will continue to meet and work together on these goals and joint opportunities.

2. Developing better local data on gambling harms and treatment needs in relation to gambling activity, service access and change in wellness

Regional research, evaluation and surveillance is needed to support appropriate and effective services for people who gamble and families in need of help. Among other areas, research can determine the role of stigma in low rates of access to services, how new gambling options have impacted risk and harm, and how need and service access may have changed due to the pandemic, increased access to online gambling and increased access to online treatment options. OGHPN members and the community will be supported by better local data to plan and deliver effective services and supports to lower the risks and harm related to gambling. In collaboration with Carleton University, OPH staff will compile and develop a surveillance report on gambling in Ottawa from Canadian Community Health Survey data. OPH, in collaboration with many partners, will also develop the Substance Use Health and Mental Health dashboard, which will include gambling indicators.

3. Expanding the reach of the OGHPN and associated actions to better reflect and represent the diverse communities and needs within Ottawa

With the leadership of a new co-chair in 2022, the network will invite information sharing from community leaders and the development of new partnerships to work towards decreased stigma and improved culturally appropriate gambling harm prevention messaging and support.

4. Due to pandemic related closures of land-based gambling venues and the availability of legal online gambling (iGaming) in Ontario as of April 4, 2022, ongoing and responsive action will be undertaken to support people in Ottawa who may experience unique harms and needs related to online gambling.

In follow-up to a planning meeting in the Summer of 2021, a working group of OGHPN members will reconvene in the Summer of 2022 to receive and review baseline data about online gambling collected over the year by the Responsible Gambling Commission (RGC) and other members. The working group will determine ways to best monitor key changes in local harms and need related to online gambling in the future and, if needed, develop new strategies to mitigate and reduce harms related to online gambling.

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¹ Canadian Community Health Survey 2007-2008, Statistics Canada, Share File, Ontario MOHLTC

² [Healthcare Indicator Tool 2020/2021YE](#) downloaded March 18, 2022

³ Centre for the Advancement of Best Practices. (2020). Determining evidence-informed options for responsible gambling and harm minimization in the field of online lottery. Toronto, ON: Responsible Gambling Council. Retrieved on July 2nd, 2021 from: https://www.responsiblegambling.org/wp-content/uploads/RGC-COVID-and-Online-Gambling-Report_June8.pdf.

⁴ Hodgins, David C.a; Stevens, Rhys M.G.b The impact of COVID-19 on gambling and gambling disorder: emerging data, Current Opinion in Psychiatry: July 2021 - Volume 34 - Issue 4 - p 332-343 doi: 10.1097/YCO.0000000000000709

⁵ Williams, R. J. & Volberg, R. A. (2013). *Gambling and problem gambling in Ontario*. Report prepared for the Ontario Problem Gambling Research Centre and the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care.

⁶ Cooper, A., Olfert, K. & Marmurek, H.H.C. Predictors of Problem Gambling for Sports and Non-sports Gamblers: A Stochastic Search Variable Selection Analysis. *J Gambl Stud* (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10899-021-10025-2>.

⁷ Korn, D.A. and H.J. Shaffer (1999). Gambling and the health of the public: Adopting a public health perspective. *Journal of Gambling Studies* 15(4), 289-365.