

March 10, 2006

Chaplain (Major General) David H. Hicks
Army Chief of Chaplains

Dear Chaplain Hicks:

Chaplains have always played a significant role in ensuring the morale and welfare of our service personnel. I am writing to offer information and assistance to Army chaplains who are asked to address a growing problem among soldiers and their dependents—problem gambling. The past 30 years have seen phenomenal growth in the availability and accessibility of gambling, including lotteries and casinos but also electronic gaming machines in formerly non-gambling venues and, most recently, gambling on the Internet. Like the civilian population, military personnel and their families are finding more gambling available to them wherever they live – whether in the United States or overseas.

A relatively small percentage of those who gamble will exhibit severe, acute, and chronic problems associated with pathological gambling. However, research suggests that higher levels of problem and pathological gambling are associated with socio-demographic characteristics of military personnel – e.g. young males. The 2002 Worldwide Survey of Health Behaviors found a strong correlation between alcohol abuse and problem gambling, a correlation also found in civilian research. The research literature suggests additional risk factors that are likely more present in the military, including depression, PTSD, higher rates of risk taking and sensation seeking, as well as downtime and boredom, especially when deployed and/or at bases that are isolated geographically or culturally/linguistically. Reports from the field note an increasing concern about gambling problems among spouses, particularly in posts with access to gambling facilities.

We believe the majority of those with gambling problems don't know it has a name, is a disorder, and is treatable. Instead of a disorder, many of these problem gamblers believe they simply have a run of bad luck, a cash flow problem or a family problem. They do not see out-of-control gambling as the true cause of their difficulties so they try to "fix" the problem by gambling more to make up for their losses. It is a vicious cycle which may lead to divorce, bankruptcy and even suicide.

In the 1989 defense authorization bill the House Armed Services Committee directed that the Pentagon to study the impact of gambling on the services. The committee report notes: "Compulsive gambling is a serious psychiatric disorder, as exhibited by the extraordinarily high rates of suicide and the high incidence of severe depression, alcohol abuse and crime associated with suffers of this illness...Because compulsive gambling

has an immediate association with financial matters, its effect on readiness and the overall mental health of service members has been largely overlooked and ignored.”

I would be pleased to meet with you or your staff to discuss how we may be of assistance, such as by providing training sessions at your annual conference and/or the Chaplain School at Ft. Jackson. The National Council on Problem Gambling has a long history of interest in this issue, stemming from the experience of our co-founders; Monsignor Joseph Dunne (043200) who was awarded the Silver Star in Korea, and Dr. Robert Custer, the former Chief of Psychiatry for the Veterans Administration. The Chair of our Task Force on Gambling in the Military is Dr. Thomas Moore, a former naval aviator.

Since 1972 the NCPG has served as the national advocate for programs and services to assist problem gamblers and their families. Our mission is to increase public awareness of pathological gambling, ensure the widespread availability of treatment for problem gamblers and their families, and to encourage research and programs for prevention and education. I attach our Issue Brief on Gambling in the Military and a recent New York Times article that highlights the tragic consequences of a gambling problem for an Army pilot. As Monsignor Dunne says: “gambling destroys the man like a self-inflicted wound.” Please feel free to contact me with any questions or comments. I look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

Keith Whyte
Executive Director

Cc: Msgr. Dunne
Dr. Moore