



**Lutheran
Advocacy
Ministry in Pennsylvania**

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A MINISTRY OF:

The Division for
Church in Society,
Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America

IN PARTNERSHIP
WITH:

The seven ELCA
synods in
Pennsylvania:

Allegheny
Lower Susquehanna
Northeastern
Northwestern
Southeastern
Southwestern
Upper Susquehanna

and the
Pennsylvania
Lutheran Agency
Network (PLAN)

HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE

HEARING ON HB 2308

September 12, 1996

Erie, Pennsylvania

My name is Russell O. Siler. I am the Director of the Lutheran Advocacy Ministry in Pennsylvania. We are a partnership agency of the Division for Church in Society of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the seven geographic synods within Pennsylvania, and the Pennsylvania Lutheran Agency Network. Our specific task is to offer a voice of the Church on behalf of those who have little or no voice in the decision-making processes of our Commonwealth. As I travel from city to town to county all over the state, people in the more than 1350 congregations of our church ask about this question of riverboat gambling, because they know what effect the introduction of casinos to our communities will have on such people.

At the outset I want to be clear about the basis for our Church's position on the expansion of state-sponsored or state-sanctioned gambling. Our strong and continuing opposition is not based on a moral aversion to gambling *per se*. We have members with a variety of thoughts and beliefs on that subject. We do, however, believe that the effects of any public policy have moral implications for our society. In the case of riverboat or land-based casinos we believe that the morality or immorality of Pennsylvania's decisions rests squarely on its overall effects on the people of our state and the quality of their lives. When we look at those effects, we find at least three major reasons for our stance.

Judiciary Committee

Lutheran Advocacy

Sept. 12, 1996

p.2

1. Gambling is a business venture which depends on large numbers of individuals losing large sums of money so that a very few people can profit. A disproportionately large segment of those who lose will be among the poor of our communities...those who can least afford to lose. We can protest all day that this should not be so, but studies indicate clearly that it is. I have often heard the argument that the question of whether or not to place a bet of any kind is a personal decision. I agree totally. However, when we know the facts of who is likely to make that personal decision when we open a casino in his backyard, the moral burden shifts back to you and to me. It would be a poor decision indeed if we were to take advantage of a poor man's propensity to bet scarce dollars on the slimmest of hopes of a big payoff, because he felt he had no other hope. Our public policy choices require firmer ground than that.

2. The experience of gambling enterprises in other states and localities leads us to the conclusion that almost all of the promises of great economic benefits for the people are illusory at best. They have been willing to receive enticing amounts of hard cash into their coffers in exchange for huge social and human costs. Large rises in the rate and incidence of bankruptcies, white collar crime, family violence, closing of small businesses in the vicinity of casinos, and compulsive gambling are just some of the consequences. Communities have learned to their distress that the authorization of casinos has been only the first step. Once a dependence on the revenue from the gambling enterprises has been established, the climate becomes one in which most, if not all, economic decisions are made with an eye to protecting and enhancing that revenue stream. Tax systems, zoning laws, budget matters, and human service direction can come to be driven by that one factor. It first entices us then compels us away from the question of what is in the best interests of all Pennsylvanians.

Judiciary Committee

Lutheran Advocacy

Sept. 12, 1996

p.3.

3. Of all the people who will be affected by the Commonwealth moving into this new gambling arena none are of greater concern than the children and adolescents of our families and communities. When we look at compulsive gamblers, we find that the fastest growing age group with this huge problem are teens. When we look at those who lose the money they cannot afford to lose, even while professing that it is their choice, we still must see their children who have no say in that choice, but who will suffer just the same. The intrusion of casino gambling into a community can create a climate that sends a clear message to our young people: "While we talk a lot about the virtue of hard work leading to success and rewards, we want to show you a terrific shortcut." The Council on Compulsive Gambling of New Jersey reports that in 1994 nearly 143,000 young people were caught as they tried to sneak into casinos. Another 10,815 were caught inside. How many escaped detection is anybody's guess.

Allowing riverboat casinos into Pennsylvania is an enticing proposition. The allure of big dollars flowing into the accounts of city, county, and state is unmistakable. But we can never be seduced into ignoring or overlooking the real costs to families, to compulsive gamblers, or to our children.

Thank you for your attention to this vital issue.