

Casino tests program to prevent gambling addiction

By Phillip Marcelo, AP

BOSTON — Massachusetts is set to launch this week a first-in-the-nation system allowing slot players to limit their bets, following months of planning and some pushback from the gambling industry.

The goal is to prevent casual players from going down the destructive path of addiction, said Marlene Warner, executive director of the Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling, which is helping administer the new feature along with the state Gaming Commission. It isn't necessarily meant to address those with serious gambling problems, she said.

"It's truly a prevention tool," Warner said. "We want people to keep gambling in a way that's healthy and safe for them, so that it doesn't rise to that problematic level."

The "Play My Way" system is being piloted at Plainridge Park, the slots parlor and harness racing track in Plainville and the only operating casino in Massachusetts so far.

If successful, the system may be imposed by the gambling commission at two other state-regulated casinos still in development: Wynn's Boston-area resort and MGM's Springfield one.

The federally recognized Mashpee Wampanoag tribe, which is building a resort casino on sovereign land in Taunton, says it's also reviewing "Play My Way," but declined to say last week whether it would commit to implementing anything similar when its First Light casino opens in part in 2017.

Massachusetts casino operators and the Washington-based

American Gaming Association initially voiced reservations about the planned system, arguing such bet limiting or “play management” programs have not proven effective in Australia, Canada, Norway, Sweden and other countries where they’ve been tried.

But American Gaming Association spokesman Christopher Moyer said “productive conversations” with the state gambling commission has allayed most of the association’s concerns.

“Any responsible gaming tool should be targeted to assist the small minority of players that may confront irresponsible play without harming the entertainment experience for nearly all players who enjoy our entertainment experience responsibly,” he said. “We’re optimistic this tool will help to achieve this goal.”

Bet limiting systems are distinct from so-called “self-exclusion” policies in place at Plainridge Park and most U.S. casinos that bar enrolled gamblers from betting at casinos outright.

Warner said the Massachusetts system, which is similar to one also in development in the Canadian province of British Columbia, also is not as draconian as those imposed elsewhere.

“Play My Way” is voluntary and is only being offered initially to players signed up with the casino’s reward card program.

Gamblers would never be cut off from betting. By enrolling, they simply receive regular, onscreen notifications as they approach or reach their limit. They also can change their betting ceiling or unenroll at any time.

“It’s just a tool to make that person aware of what’s happening and the decisions they’re making.” Warner said.