

# Canada

## BAD BET GOVERNMENT'S GAMBLING ADDICTION

# What to do when your best customers have a problem

Government-owned casinos looking for ways to deal with problem gamblers should look to the Netherlands



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Problem gambler Barbar Maalouf signed a form banning himself from Ontario's casinos more than six years ago, but he returned to Woodbine Racetrack hundreds of times, driving up his total gambling debt to at least \$1-million.

So severe was his compulsion to bet that for five months he had no home, and at times the free casino buffet was the only meal for him and his wife, Georgia.

"I went [almost] every day after I self-excluded," said Mr. Maalouf, who once made a low-six-figure salary as owner of a limousine business.

The 59-year-old is suing the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corp., claiming that even though he signed the self-exclusion form and had his photograph taken, he was repeatedly allowed into Woodbine Racetrack. The lawsuit contains allegations that have not been proven in court.

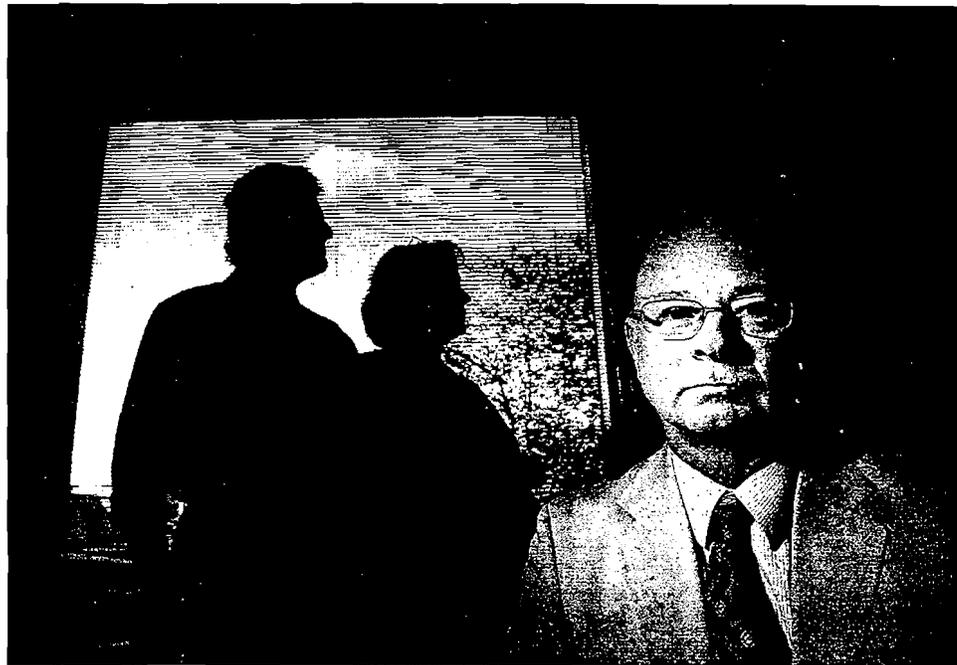
According to his lawyer, William McMaster, the last time Mr. Maalouf was at Woodbine — on Sept. 14 — was the only time he was caught there; he was charged with trespassing.

In its statement of defence, OLG says the form Mr. Maalouf signed in May, 2003, did not contain any agreement, undertaking or commitment to ensure he was denied access to all Ontario gambling facilities, adding, "as such, he must bear responsibility for any losses he did suffer."

Mr. Maalouf's contentious story is all too common. Policing of self-bans has been a vexing problem for government-owned casinos. Experts say they should be overseen by a third party and not by casinos that stand to profit from problem gamblers.

"The conflict is that problem gamblers are their best customers," said Roger Horbay, addictions specialist and electronic gaming machine expert of Game Planit Interactive Corp., where he is president. "It makes it hard for them to do the right thing."

A Globe and Mail investigation has revealed government-owned casinos are spending hundreds of millions of dollars on freebies — trips, dinners, theatre tickets — that keep gamblers coming back. Gambling debts have led to bankruptcies and even suicides.



Barbar Maalouf, left, shown with wife Georgia and lawyer Bill McMaster, says he gambled at Woodbine Racetrack almost every day after he signed a self-exclusion agreement meant to ban him from Ontario's government-run casinos in 2003. FRED LUM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Robert Williams, of the Alberta Gaming Research Institute, on self-exclusion programs

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"The ultimate problem with the self-exclusion program, which was commendable in theory, is that it was doomed to failure because it could not be enforced, with the memory-based system they put in place," Mr. McMaster said.

"They are addicted to the revenues and they don't recognize the addiction themselves but they want my client to recognize it."

Efforts to detect voluntary self-excluders typically amount to a binder filled with thousands of gambler photographs located in the casino security office. Effectively, the system relies on the memory of a few to enforce the exclusion of many.

Without enforcement, a self-exclusion program may actually be harmful as it provides false hope, said Robert Williams, the Lethbridge coordinator of the Alberta Gaming Research Institute. "It will convince problem gamblers that someone is going to provide due diligence," he said. "But they don't."

#### THE DUTCH WAY

Ask experts what country has the most effective system of dealing with problem gamblers and they answer as one: the Netherlands.

There, 15 visits in one month trigger a conversation with a

supervisor; it takes fewer visits for gamblers under age 24. Last year, 35,000 gamblers of all ages had talks, resulting in 4,563 visit limitations and 5,340 bans, said Abigail Hall, spokeswoman for Holland Casino.

Gamblers are required to provide photo identification before entering a casino, making it simple to detect a self-excluder or people violating their visit limits. Those who want to return are closely watched to see if they go back to their old gambling ways. If so, they have another interview, which often results in another visit limitation or ban.

Most people, said Pieter Remmers, director of Assissa Consultancy Europe and the creator of a responsible-gaming program in use at Holland Casino and in other European countries, "appreciate the fact they [casinos] are not only after the money."

In Canada, Saskatchewan does the most to detect problem gamblers. Its i-Care computer system uses algorithms to analyze gambling patterns from the player's card, alerting casino employees when it detects unusual changes in the amount of time and money a player is spending.

Repeated ATM withdrawals, gambling for more than three hours and not taking breaks

can also trigger a talk with a responsible-gaming employee; as of Sept. 24, casinos in Regina and Moose Jaw had logged 6,920 interactions this year. But the system stops short of the Netherlands program, which has more direct dialogue with gamblers.

In Ontario, casinos are expanding their facial-recognition technology in a bid to detect more self-excluders. British Columbia has begun using licence-plate-recognition technology at three casinos and is planning to roll it out at others.

After researching the issue in 2006, lawyers William Sasso and Jasminka Kalajdzic said courts would conclude that governments have a duty of care to take reasonable steps to enforce their self-exclusion programs. A more difficult question is what casinos should do to detect problem gamblers in the first place.

"We have a significant medical problem," Mr. Sasso said, adding that governments need to develop a sustainable business model that "shouldn't be based on the short-term exploitation of any group of people who can't help themselves."

No province has more lawsuits involving self-exclusion than Ontario: it has settled nine such cases and three ad-

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ditional cases regarding problem gambling. In addition, a proposed \$3.5-billion class-action suit has been filed on behalf of more than 10,000 Ontario gamblers who self-excluded.

In Mr. Maalouf's case, he signed a self-exclusion agreement in May, 2003, after he lost \$7,500 in one day. His wife Georgia went to the slots at Woodbine Racetrack with him that day.

"Self-exclusion is a joke," said Ms. Maalouf, who thought when her husband signed up that "this time, he will get help. How wrong was I?"

Although Mr. Maalouf was caught once at Casino Rama in 2005, he simply went to Woodbine Racetrack that night and for years afterwards, he said in an interview. Up to Sept. 5, 2009, his wife's card was used 841 times at Woodbine after he self-excluded, OLG records obtained by Mr. McMaster reveal.

The lawyer says Mr. Maalouf lost more than \$300,000 after he self-excluded, bringing his total gambling debt to at least \$1-million.

Today, Mr. Maalouf is on medication and under the care of a psychiatrist. He is rebuilding his limo business. Getting involved in gambling, he said, "that's what ruined my life."