



EVERGREEN
council on problem gambling

BEST PRACTICES AND BROAD PERSPECTIVES FOR VOLUNTARY SELF-EXCLUSION PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

The Evergreen Council on Problem Gambling (ECPG) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to providing services and programs for those with a gambling or gaming problem/Gambling Disorder, their families, employers, students, treatment professionals, and the greater community through gambling addiction treatment support, information and education, advocacy, research, and prevention efforts. Founded in 1991, ECPG maintains a position of neutrality on gambling and gaming, recognizing that most people who gamble do so for recreation and suffer no serious problems. However, for some, gambling becomes a serious addiction, devastating to the individual and family. ECPG is the Washington State Affiliate of the National Council on Problem Gambling.

ECPG MISSION

The Evergreen Council on Problem Gambling is dedicated to increasing awareness of public health issues around problem gambling and gaming, expanding the availability and integration of services, and supporting advocacy, research, and programs for education, prevention, treatment, recovery, and responsible gambling and gaming.

Supporting the Gaming Industry's efforts to provide information and tools to reduce harms by offering Voluntary Self-Exclusion Programs is an important part of ECPG's work. Our Council provides this brief overview of *Best Practices and Broad Perspectives* to assist Gaming Operators in developing Voluntary Self-Exclusion Programs that are designed to help and empower people in getting the help they need to address their gambling problems and achieve their health goals.

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Note: This is a brief overview only. Each content area has many components to consider and will, undoubtedly, bring up additional questions. Please do not hesitate to let our ECPG Staff know if there are other ways we can assist in discussions, planning, and program development.

INTRODUCTION

Self-exclusion is, first and foremost, a tool for individuals who believe that they have a problem with gambling and can voluntarily bar themselves from entering one or more gambling venues to help prevent their gambling behaviors. Most people report that they decided to self-exclude themselves, although family and friends may also play a role in the decision to self-exclude. Financial problems often constitute the main reason for self-exclusion and most people report that they are unable to stop gambling of their own accord. Severe financial hardship, stress caused by their gambling problems that affect their physical and mental health, desperation, and suicidal thoughts are all among the feelings shared by individuals as they contemplate signing up for Self-Exclusion Programs.

When people are considering self-exclusion, they are looking for help. Voluntary Self-Exclusion Programs are important tools that the Gaming Industry can offer their guests to enhance customer service and corporate responsibility, support harm-minimization, and assist self-excluding individuals to get the help they need to address their problems and achieve their goals. Self-Exclusion programs should help and empower people, not make them feel like criminals. Here is some of the information gleaned from research that may be helpful when considering development of Self-Exclusion Programs.

Despite evidence for effectiveness, only a small proportion of individuals with gambling-related problems or Gambling Disorder ever seek treatment and support resources for their problem. Voluntary self-exclusion (VSE) programs are an ideal circumstance to engage individuals who are reluctant or have not yet sought formal treatment, given that individuals are already electing to prevent themselves from gambling through self-exclusion. (Yakovenko, I., & Hodgins, D. (2021). Effectiveness of a voluntary casino self-exclusion online self-management program. *Internet Interventions* 23 (2021) 100354 Elsevier B.V.)

This self-directed intervention is often the first serious attempt a person makes to control their gambling (Blaszczynski et al. 2004).

Participants in self-exclusion programs state that the program had been very helpful in regaining control of their financial affairs and overcoming relationship problems. Furthermore, many participants found the process of enrolling into the program empowering and saw it as the start of their recovery. (Croucher et al. 2006)

Benefits include participants reporting decreases in gambling expenditure and improved financial circumstances; decreases in gambling frequency and time spent gambling; reduction in problem gambling severity and negative consequences of gambling; reduction in related psychological difficulties including depression and anxiety; and feeling they have more control of their circumstances. (Gainsbury 2014)

EXPECTATIONS AND PURPOSE

For Voluntary Self-Exclusion Programs to be effective, clear information about the self-exclusion program and wide promotion of the program are both important. Casino staff and Tribal Gaming Authority/Regulators should have an effective training program for all staff who have a role in enforcing the self-exclusion program, including refresher training.

“The features and principles of a self-exclusion program should be fully understood by individuals who wish to self-exclude, employees of gaming venues, gaming venue operations, and regulatory bodies. This is essential in order to clarify expectations regarding the role and limits of all parties including legal and governmental authorities and avoid unrealistic expectations and unfair criticisms.” (Gainsbury 2014)

Some of the areas that must be covered with the guest at the time of Self-Exclusion Registration (pursuant to the Gaming Venue’s Policies and Procedures):

- Agreement not to enter gaming areas, not to play gaming machines, or not to enter the venue at all
- Authorizing Casino/Regulatory staff to stop them from entering or remaining in a gaming area or venue from which they are excluded
- Accept their personal responsibility to stay away from the venue
- Clear roles and expectations, including how compliance breaches will be managed; and how Self-Exclusion Extensions or Reinstatements are handled
- Clear description of Self-Exclusion term options – let the individual choose, do NOT lead them into any particular option
- Clear information on player cards and loyalty points (does individual have more than one player card or is registered under more than one name?)
- Cessation of promotional materials
- Winnings forfeiture policies
- Share options for support resources (treatment and recovery resources; financial management counseling; community resources)

GUEST INTERACTION AND REGISTRATION

Registration in a Voluntary Self-Exclusion Program should not be cumbersome or stigmatizing to the guest. Staff training at multiple access points is key to ensuring consistency and a professional process.

- Make registration available at multiple access points (casino, TGA and/or Corporate offices; Health Care services location; casino hotel guest services...)
- Registration should take place in a comfortable, private, friendly setting that ensures confidentiality and respects the individual (don't make them feel like a criminal or engage in stigmatizing behaviors and verbal communications – encourage the guest in making healthy gaming choices that can include self-exclusion as an individual tool to support those choices.)
- Ensure all processes and procedures are consistent regardless of where registration takes place (use the same forms; take the same type and size of picture; same staff training...)
- Staff interacting with guests during the Self-Exclusion Registration should be specially selected and trained to provide a responsive, respectful, and professional process. Trained “Ambassadors/Supervisors” should conduct meeting, explanations, and registration.
 - Do not offer the guest an opportunity to engage in “one last bet” or to “finish spending their free-play money.”
 - Self-Exclusion Registration should be handled discreetly and in a timely fashion. It is best to offer the guest a seat in a comfortable, quiet, private area. If, for any reason, the guest is asked to wait for assistance with Self-Exclusion Registration, do not offer or ask the guest to wait at a gaming machine or gaming table, or within or near the gaming floor.

SUPPORT SERVICES AND RESOURCES

Ensure that information on resources and/or actual resources are available to assist players.

- Share options for support resources (treatment and recovery resources; financial management counseling; community resources)

People using self-exclusion programs noted the following items that should be stronger: Many gamblers felt that the programs did not provide them with sufficient resources on problem gambling treatment and support during the ban period; that the detection process was not strong enough; the program was not well advertised; and they should be able to renew a self-exclusion agreement without going back to the casino (Ladouceur et al. 2000).

All self-exclusion participants' names must be removed from marketing lists and participants should be made aware that any winnings during the self-exclusion period (indicating the individual has breached the self-exclusion agreement) will be forfeited and made available to a Tribal or nonprofit organization that supports prevention/awareness, treatment, and recovery support for those affected by problem gambling.

SELF-EXCLUSION PERIOD/TERM OPTIONS

(No Early Reinstatement Options)

Periods of self-exclusion in gaming venues across the world vary substantially. But most often options range from 6 months to irrevocable lifetime bans.

Almost all research indicates that it is best to offer a range of exclusion time periods. ECPG recommends a minimum of 1 year to allow individuals sufficient time to enter treatment if desired. Longer bans may be more effective, and ECPG recommends offering the Lifetime (irrevocable) *option* for those who might choose it. Offer one or two other interim options (2 years and/or 3 years) that are not Lifetime so that individuals have choices that do not deter them from registering for the self-exclusion program when only a Lifetime exclusion is offered. “In general, most participants felt that longer bans were better because they felt that most gamblers with problems do not realize how serious their problems are at the time of self-exclusion. Most participants recommended a minimum ban length of one year because they felt that shorter bans were easy to wait-out and did not provide enough time for people who had self-excluded to stabilize and develop healthier behaviours.” (Responsible Gambling Council, 2008)

ECPG RECOMMENDED SELF-EXCLUSION TERMS:

1 year

2 year

3 year

Lifetime (irrevocable)

SELF-EXCLUSION EXTENSION AND/OR ACTIVE REINSTATEMENT

A reinstatement process should be put in place before the self-excluded individual is permitted re-entry into casino/gaming facilities. Prior to the end of the self-exclusion term, individuals should be contacted with appropriate information and clear details regarding reinstatement requirements. Individuals should be able to extend the Self-Exclusion period.

ECPG recommends an Active Reinstatement Process, whereby the individual must apply to be reinstated (preferably in writing). This allows, yet again, an opportunity to provide the individual with support and information regarding treatment and support resources, rather than a Passive Reinstatement where the individual can automatically re-enter the casino after the end of the exclusion period. If the individual does not initiate reinstatement prior to the initial term end, then the ban, as well as any consequences for breaches, would continue in force. (NOTE: This needs to be clearly stated on Self-Exclusion forms and materials and explained carefully to the individual – suggest signing/initially next to this provision).

Even if reinstatement is granted, suggest a 30-day waiting period after approval and resend a package with information on problem and responsible gambling, treatment and recovery resources, and financial management counseling options.

Determine how many times you want to offer an extension before the ban should be permanent. Suggestion: Initial Self-Exclusion; Second (Extension); with Third Request – consider initiating Lifetime Self-Exclusion as permanent/irrevocable ban.

COMPLIANCE AND BREACHES OF AGREEMENT; CONSEQUENCES

(Enforcement and Support)

Be clear upfront on what the consequences are and make sure you use any breach as another opportunity to share treatment and support resources with respect and confidentiality. Potential consequences might include:

- Verbal warning and/or warning letter – in discreet and respectful meeting with a trained Ambassador/Supervisor
- Escorted off premises
- Trespass charge
- Fines (not recommended by ECPG)
- Forfeiture of any winnings while Self-Excluded (winnings to go to Tribal or nonprofit program for problem gambling prevention/awareness, treatment, and recovery supports.)

PROMOTING AWARENESS OF SELF-EXCLUSION PROGRAM

Most gaming venues have great opportunities to advertise self-exclusion programs on their websites and through print materials and displays throughout the casino, including in “discreet locations” such as restrooms; on ATM machines; potential for information kiosk/Responsible Gaming Center within casino.

Promotion of the self-exclusion program as well as support services and resources should be available at the casino as well as information provided in the general community and through health and mental health centers and other relevant support services. Relevant professionals (treatment professionals, financial counselors, court systems) should all be informed about the program so that they may refer clients as appropriate.

A major aspect of promoting self-exclusion programs is educating casino/gaming staff, Tribal Gaming Authority and other regulatory staff at every level on the program. Anyone interacting with a guest should be aware of the program and how to access it in a timely manner. Create a *Culture of Responsible Gaming* throughout your venue and at all levels – from the top down.

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

Individuals who have experienced the self-exclusion process report mixed feelings in a wide variety of studies and reports. When the staff is supportive and compassionate, the guest felt comfortable. Often, however, reports that staff were rude, uncaring, and disrespectful, or staff and situations (isolated dark rooms behind the security office; noisy areas that didn't offer privacy) that made the guest feel "like a criminal" were barriers.

It is important to remove any unnecessary complexities in the application and registration process, including for those who have limited proficiencies in English, and unnecessary legal jargon....Individuals should have the ability to enact agreements away from gaming venues, such as at a central administrative office, with a health or mental health treatment provider or legal professional, or via the Internet or mail. (Gainsbury 2014)

During the process of enrollment, privacy and confidentiality were an important concern. Venue staffs' attitude was also frequently criticized: staff members were perceived as not sufficiently briefed on the process and did not provide reasonable sensitivity, encouragement, or support. (Hing, Nuske, et al, 2015; Hing et al, 2014).

RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

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