



# 2021-2022: Enhancing Effectiveness in Problem Gambling Helpline Services in the Commonwealth

In July of 2020, the Office of Problem Gambling Services (OPGS) of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health launched an integrated problem gambling initiative to better serve people experiencing problem gambling in the Commonwealth. By contracting Health Resources in Action, which has operated the MA Substance Use Helpline for more than 20 years, OPGS has operationalized its goals of improving the consumer experience for those seeking problem gambling treatment and support, increasing reach, and achieving greater efficiency and alignment — all while access to gambling venues and activities continues to grow in Massachusetts.

## An Integrated Approach

Research indicates that gambling is interrelated with various health issues and disproportionately impacts individuals with mental health disorders, substance use disorders, and communities of color. Historically, community-level experiences of gambling and communities of color are often not the focus of problem gambling services and efforts. OPGS is committed to leading a public health approach to problem gambling that is centered on evidence and equity in order to improve access, better identify, and serve those experiencing problem gambling. In addition to launching the Problem Gambling Helpline, OPGS also launched the MA Technical Assistance Center for Problem Gambling Treatment (M-TAC), which provides training and capacity building efforts for problem gambling treatment. These integrations created efficiencies by leveraging an existing and comprehensive data infrastructure, cost-sharing for the Helplines' centralized contact center, and streamlining coordination

in support of problem gambling treatment in Massachusetts. Most important, bringing together problem gambling and substance use services is a key step in a more holistic, equitable, public health approach to the behavioral health system.

"I spoke with [calltaker] this morning... inquiring about gambling addiction for a minor. He was very nice...and is patient and empathetic. So glad I got him on the phone, I feel so much better already."

— PROBLEM GAMBLING HELPLINE CALLER

## Improved Consumer and Provider Experience

With robust data and operational systems, existing contact center infrastructure, and behavioral health expertise, the MA Problem Gambling Helpline has offered improved consumer and treatment provider experience since 2020.

- Trained, experienced Helpline Specialists provide information, education, support, and treatment referrals supported by established protocols, driven by data, and subject to continuous quality improvement.
- Clinical staff manage operations and support Helpline Specialists, most of whom are AIRS (Alliance of Information and Referral Systems)-certified.
- Helpline Specialists are cross-trained and able to provide expert support to those experiencing problem gambling or substance use, as well as the many callers experiencing co-occurring disorders.
- Callers can now speak with Helpline Specialists by phone, text, and chat services 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, in any language. Callers receive Helpline support immediately, with a wait time of only 39 seconds. They can also opt-in to receive a follow-up call from a Helpline Clinician, who assesses whether the caller has accessed services and can offer support in navigating services.”
- Since launch, there have been 71 referrals made to Voluntary Self-Exclusion (VSE) for those whose primary concern is casino gambling.

Callers who provided feedback rated their overall Helpline satisfaction at 4.8 out of 5.

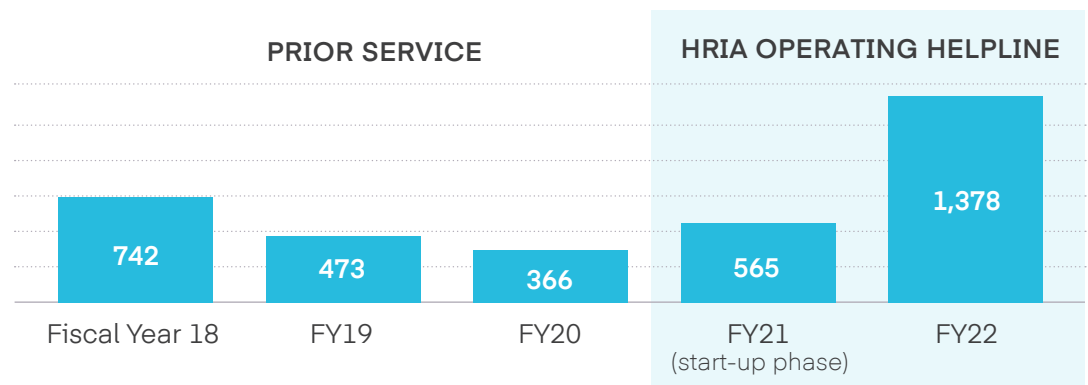
- The Problem Gambling Helpline’s new, dedicated website creates an optimal experience for consumers and providers with user-friendly search and screening features, live chat, and comprehensive information about problem gambling and treatment options.
- Providers of both problem gambling and substance use treatment services can keep their program information up-to-date through one centralized provider portal, and problem gambling providers can easily access technical assistance and other support through an integrated Helpline and M-TAC website.
- The Helpline’s robust database ensures that Helpline users have access to up-to-date information on over 60 providers across the state.
- An integrated data dashboard tracks unique (non-repeat) calls to the Helpline, call outcome, and website analytics.

“I just spoke with [calltaker] and I found him very patient, understanding, and helpful. Thank you.”

— PROBLEM GAMBLING HELPLINE CALLER

### Phone calls by Fiscal Year

Total number of calls (may include repeat callers)



### Website Use by Fiscal Year

	FY21 (start-up phase)	FY 22
Visitors (unique)	12,823	56,455
Website sessions	14,863	85,150

## Expanded Reach

OPGS' integrated approach has ensured that more consumers are reached and access Helpline services, more people at risk of problem gambling are screened, and treatment providers are supported through integrated Helpline and M-TAC services.

- Integrated Helpline services have created a new entry point for people who may be experiencing problem gambling. Helpline Specialists screen callers whose primary concern is substance use for problem gambling as appropriate, and nearly 1 in 5 referrals for problem gambling came from callers to the MA Substance Use Helpline.
- Cross-promotional opportunities between each Helpline build awareness of the breadth of problem gambling and substance use services among

consumers and providers through Helpline websites, social media, and outreach activities throughout Massachusetts.

- Since the launch of the new Problem Gambling Helpline website in October 2021, over 68,000 users have visited the website totaling more than 100,000 website sessions.
  - Ultimately, the number of Problem Gambling Helpline calls and web visits has grown exponentially over the last 2 years, with the number of calls increasing by more than 276% from FY20 to FY22, and unique website visitors growing by 340% from FY21 to FY22.
- + The vast majority of the increase in numbers reflects a significant improvement of Helpline services.

## Who does the Helpline serve?

**Approximately 2/3 of callers are people engaged in gambling; nearly ¾ are men, and the largest age group is 20-29.**

"Adam" is a 29-year old man who lives in the Boston area and found the Helpline through an internet search. He has been gambling at the casino, which he enjoyed as entertainment at first, but he's started going to the casino more often as a coping mechanism for his depression. He called the Helpline in a panic, since he'd just lost a fair amount of money. The Helpline Specialist assured Adam that there is help and that he's taken a good step by making the call to the Helpline. Adam was offered referrals to counseling programs near him, and provided information about how to limit his casino activity through the voluntary self-exclusion program.

**About 1 in 5 callers is a concerned family member calling about a male in their family**

"Barbara" is a 64-year old woman who is seeking help for her son, who is in his 30s and has been actively gambling online. She is concerned because he is missing work and struggling to pay his bills and she's afraid he might be evicted from his home. She doesn't know whether she's helped by lending him money, and thinks he might need legal and financial guidance. A Helpline Specialist provided referrals for her son to local counseling programs and self-help and recovery support groups. The Specialist also offered referrals to family support groups, so that Barbara could learn more about how to support her son and how to take care of herself.



Massachusetts Problem  
Gambling Helpline  
[GamblingHelplineMA.org](https://www.gamblinghelplinema.org)  
800-327-5050



MA Technical Assistance Center  
for Problem Gambling Treatment

Massachusetts Technical  
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