THIS WEEK BY CHRIS FUSCO
January 14, 2013 12:46AM

A slot machine at Hollywood Casino in Aurora

storyidforme: 42825549
tmspicid: 15845521
fileheaderid: 7127601

Updated: January 14, 2013 9:36AM

Out for an evening walk in downtown Aurora with her four grandchildren, Mary J. Speropoulos felt the need to gamble. She couldn't resist.

So she headed to Hollywood Casino that day, Sept. 12, 2011, then left her grandkids alone outside the casino while she went inside to play the slots.The youngest grandchild was 8 months old. The others: 1, 8 and 11 years old.

A casino maintenance worker quickly noticed the four children. They told him their grandma was inside the casino. He radioed security officers, who paged Speropoulos and brought her in to meet with police, according to court and Illinois Gaming Board records.

Speropoulos, now 55, was charged with child endangerment. The Aurora grandmother pleaded guilty and was sentenced to a year of court supervision and fined $250.

It was one of 52 such instances statewide in a period of a little over two and a half years,

gaming board records show.

In all, the adults involved left 85 children unsupervised at casinos across Illinois between Jan. 1, 2010, and July 31, 2012 — in the establishments' lobbies, parking areas, hotels and restaurants.

With only a small number of cases — fewer than two a month statewide, on average — it hasn't been a pressing concern. For context, more than 16 million people visited Illinois casinos last year.

Still, with Mayor Rahm Emanuel urging Illinois lawmakers to give Chicago its first casino, and with electronic gambling machines finally beginning to pop up at bars and restaurants statewide, an outspoken opponent of gambling says it's likely that more children will be left alone and possibly placed in danger.

"At least the casinos police their parking lots," says the Rev. Tom Grey, senior adviser to Stop Predatory Gambling, a Washington, D.C. anti-gambling organization. "Who's going to watch the taverns and parking lots by all these video-poker machines?"

A 2009 state law legalized video gambling in communities that don't ban it. With 2,293 such machines in use statewide outside Chicago, which has a ban, and thousands more expected to come online soon, more children being left alone is a legitimate concern, says Mark Ostrowski, the gaming board's administrator.

But policing all of the gaming sites in Illinois to deal with the issue isn't something his agency can do, Ostrowski says. The gaming board has law-enforcement agents aboard every casino, but not at the bars and restaurants that have video poker and other electronic devices.

"We just don't have the resources to be able to monitor every location in the state to make sure children aren't being left unattended," Ostrowski says.

The Chicago Sun-Times' examination of gaming board records found that casinos' ways of dealing with the problem vary widely. In some instances, people were arrested for leaving a child unattended at a casino, state records show. In others, they got ticketed or received a warning about the dangers of leaving children alone. They also often ended up being banned.

"A warning might be issued, for instance, if the parent was in a nearby restroom," says Tom Swoik, executive director of the Illinois Casino Gaming Association, which represents six of the state's 10 casinos: Rivers in Des Plaines, Argosy in Alton, Hollywood in Aurora and Joliet, and Harrah's in Joliet and Metropolis. "The length of any ban varies among members and is on a case-by-case basis."

Ten people identified in the "minor unattended" reports involving the incidents at casinos were arrested on child-endangerment charges or ticketed for leaving minors unattended.

Only one casino — Rivers, which opened in July 2011 — didn't have even a single case of a child left unattended.

Grand Victoria Casino in Elgin had the most cases: 11. The police didn't arrest or ticket anyone in connection with those cases, though Grand Victoria banned the adults involved, citing its "unattended-minors policy."Joliet's two casinos — Harrah's and Hollywood — had a total of eight cases. Police there issued $300 tickets to three parents. One of those parents fought the ticket and won.

In Rock Island, Jumer's Casino had five cases, in which two adults were arrested and convicted.

In the latest case there, records show a foster mother left two girls, ages 3 and 6, alone in her car on a 96-degree day for nearly half an hour last July.

Renee L. Arku, 53, of Andalusia, said she went inside the casino to pick up a "free gift" and "didn't realize how long the line would be," according to a gaming board report. Even though she'd left the windows down, "Both girls had red cheeks and were sweating" when a casino security supervisor found them, and there was no water inside the car.

Arku immediately lost custody of the girls. She was found guilty of child endangerment in October and was sentenced last week to one year of court supervision and fined $869. A judge also ordered her to “complete any parent counseling and gambling-treatment program as recommended.”

No foster children have been placed with Arku since her arrest, and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services is “in the process of revoking her foster parenting license,” according to agency spokesman Dave Clarkin.

Arku’s lawyer didn’t respond to requests for comment.

None of the cases cited in the gaming board reports involved children getting hurt as a result of being left alone at a casino. Elsewhere, though, there have been some horror stories, including that of a 10-day-old girl who died of dehydration in a hot car while her gambling-addicted mother played video poker inside a South Carolina casino in 1997.

Illinois law bans anyone under 21 from entering areas where gambling takes place.

Besides casino parking lots and garages, children were found alone in casino hotels.

They included a 4-year-old Evanston boy whose mother told authorities she left him alone so she could bring a hat to her boyfriend, who was playing poker inside a Harrah’s in Downstate Metropolis. The boy locked himself out of the hotel room the afternoon of March 25, 2011, and was found wandering a hallway, according to the Metropolis police. Surveillance video showed he was alone for about 30 minutes.

Michelle E. Pelletier, the mother, who’s now 25, pleaded guilty to child endangerment, was sentenced to six months of court supervision and fined $400. Attempts to reach her were unsuccessful.

Gaming board agents at each casino, casino security officers or the police called the DCFS hotline in 22 of the 52 cases statewide, including Pelletier's.

In five cases, the agency found evidence of inadequate supervision and began monitoring the families involved.

In the case of Speropoulos, who left her grandchildren along the Fox River riverwalk near Hollywood Casino in Aurora, her daughter told gaming board agents that her mother "has a gambling problem" and "was upset that her mother had brought [her children] to a casino."

Neither Speropoulos nor her lawyer could be reached for comment.In another case at the Aurora casino, a 12-year-old girl was left alone for nearly 30 minutes in the casino's boarding area after midnight on Aug. 23, 2010, while her stepmother went inside to find her father. No one was charged.

In East St. Louis, a father was arrested for child endangerment on Jan. 2, 2010, after he left his 6-year-old son in his car in the Casino Queen parking lot for nearly 45 minutes while it was 12 degrees out. He told gaming board agents he had "free food coming from the casino" and got "caught up." He wasn't prosecuted.

The gaming board requires DCFS to be called if "unattended-children incidents fall within the definition of child abuse or child neglect." The board's three-page policy cites 15 criteria — including age, weather conditions, the time of the incident and whether the child was left with a phone number to call for help — to gauge whether neglect has occurred.

Ostrowski says that gaming board agents sometimes "have to make difficult judgment calls" regarding minors left unsupervised.

Casinos and video gambling bring in tax money. Altogether, the state's 10 casinos provided $576 million in taxes to state and local governments last year. Video gambling contributed more than $2 million to state and local coffers in its first four months, between September and December.

"Gambling certainly brings benefits to the state and local communities," Ostrowski says. "At the

same time, with those benefits come social ills."

Children left unattended "is one of those factors we don't like to see, and we do the best job possible to prevent that from happening."

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