

OPEN LETTER TO NSW PREMIER GLADYS BEREJKLIAN REGARDING GAMING ROOM OPERATION DURING COVID-19

*The Hon Gladys Berejiklian, Premier of New South Wales
CC The Hon Victor Dominello, Minister for Customer Service
CC The Hon Brad Hazzard, Minister for Health*

Via email

17 July 2020

Dear Premier,

We, the undersigned representatives of NCOSS, Wesley Mission, the Western Sydney Community Forum, and the Alliance for Gambling Reform, write this open letter to you to seek the closure of gaming rooms in NSW during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our organisations have deep concerns about the continued operation of gaming rooms while COVID-19 remains active in NSW.

Many of the measures that you have introduced during the crisis have proved essential and effective in protecting the health and wellbeing of NSW residents. We urge you to continue this pattern in relation to the considerable health risks and social harm that gaming rooms present.

The following need urgent consideration by the NSW Government in relation to closing gaming rooms:

- Significant issues around the potential transmission of the virus due to the repeated touching of poker machines and the unregulated movement of people within and between gambling rooms, given how easily COVID-19 spreads
- Concern for venue staff being exposed to infected people, and also to people who may be experiencing extreme stress due to unemployment or other economic and social factors. These people will be experiencing gambling harm
- The numerous critical public health issues associated with gambling harm, including mental ill-health, family violence, and homelessness.
- Concerns for people who are gambling using the superannuation they have accessed due to COVID-related hardship
- Issues around people “venue hopping” while gambling, which is inevitably occurring and has already been associated with the Picton Hotel COVID cluster
- The need to protect the vital NSW hospitality industry ahead of gambling interests.

We find it difficult to understand how gambling can be considered an essential service at any time, let alone during a pandemic and the current economic crisis.

Gambling is a direct net drain on the NSW economy, and the devastating consequences of gambling harm also weigh heavily on the local economy, and our social services.

We urge you to consider the immediate closure of gaming rooms to protect the health and wellbeing of the NSW public, and the staff working in these venues.

NSW will be dealing with the social and economic consequences of this pandemic for decades to come, as will our organisations. Minimising the harmful fallout of this pandemic is essential, and closing gaming rooms is one measure you can enact to reduce this harm.

Listening to public health experts about managing this pandemic has been integral to keeping COVID-19 infections and deaths to a minimum in NSW. We ask you to consider the voice of public health experts about gambling harm and the impact it has in the state, especially now.

Yours Sincerely,

Joanna Quilty

Chief Executive Officer
NCOSS

Rev Keith V Garner AM,

CEO/Superintendent
Wesley Mission

Billie Sankovic

Chief Executive Officer
Western Sydney Community Forum

Rev Tim Costello

Chief Advocate
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