

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB0758 (HB 758)

Problem Gambling – Authorized Uses of Funds – Alterations

House Ways and Means Committee

Position: FAVORABLE

Chair, Vice Chair, and members of the Committee,

Thank you for the chance to submit testimony in support of **HB0758**. My name is **William Merrick**, and I'm a **Certified Peer Recovery Specialist (CPRS)**. I'm speaking in favor of this bill because I've watched addiction tear through people's lives in real time—and I've also watched what happens when the right support shows up at the right moment.

HB0758 is grounded in something that people in the field, and people who've lived it, already know: **addiction does not exist in silos**. Folks don't walk through the door as "just a gambler" or "just a drinker" or "just a person using opioids." More often than not, it's layered. Pain stacks. Trauma stacks. Stress stacks. And people reach for whatever gives them relief in the moment; sometimes that's substances, sometimes that's gambling, and sometimes it's both. The harm doesn't stay separated, so the funding and services shouldn't be boxed in either.

What HB0758 fixes

HB0758 adjusts how Maryland supports problem gambling treatment and prevention by expanding and strengthening what the state can fund through the **Problem Gambling Fund**.

It keeps the focus on clinically appropriate services; like inpatient, outpatient, intensive outpatient, continuing care, educational services, and services for victims of domestic violence, because those supports are absolutely necessary.

But the bill does two additional things that matter a lot on the ground:

1. **It explicitly allows reimbursement to support peers providing behavioral health services** to individuals with problem gambling issues who are in treatment or prevention programs.
2. After the problem-gambling requirements are met, it allows **any unspent funds** to be used for **drug and other addiction treatment services**.

That second part is huge, because it reflects real life. If Maryland has dollars on the table and people are struggling across addiction types, the state should have a lawful, practical way to use those funds to help people—period.

Why peer reimbursement belongs in this bill

Let me tell you what peer support actually looks like.

A peer is often the first person someone trusts enough to tell the truth to—about the debt, the lying, the panic, the relapse, the fear of losing their family, the shame of walking back into a program “again.” And that honesty is the doorway to change.

Peers help people:

- **stay engaged** when the excitement of “I’m gonna change” wears off and real life hits
- **show up** to appointments when anxiety, depression, and shame are screaming at them to hide
- **problem-solve barriers** like transportation, housing instability, court issues, childcare, paperwork, and fear of being judged
- **build a recovery plan** that fits their actual life, not an ideal version of it
- **reconnect** with hope when they feel like they’re too far gone

When people are trapped in problem gambling, the cycle is brutal: chase losses, hide it, more stress, more secrecy, more gambling. It can escalate fast, and it can quietly destroy everything. Peer support interrupts that cycle with something clinical services alone don’t always deliver quickly: **relatable connection and consistent accountability**.

HB0758 recognizes this by allowing reimbursement to support peers doing this work in treatment and prevention settings.

That means programs can hire and keep peers instead of treating peer roles like a “maybe” depending on unpredictable funding. It means peer services aren’t treated like a bonus; they’re treated like part of the solution.

Why allowing unspent funds to support broader addiction services is smart policy

HB0758 also says that after required problem gambling expenses are satisfied, any unspent funds may go toward **drug and other addiction treatment services**.

That’s not “mission drift.” That’s **reality-based prevention**.

Because what happens when a person’s gambling spirals?

- They may start using substances to cope with anxiety, insomnia, depression, or shame.
- They may relapse because stress and desperation are sky-high.
- They may experience domestic conflict or violence, housing loss, legal trouble, job loss—things that increase the risk of substance use and overdose.

So if Maryland has money already dedicated to addressing the harm created by gambling, it makes sense to allow flexibility—*after core requirements are met*—to address the connected addiction crises that are happening in the same communities, often in the same households, sometimes in the same person.

This isn't "either/or." It's "both/and." And HB0758 is written that way.

Why this bill matters

I've met people who looked fine on the outside—job, family, smile—and were drowning in private hell because gambling had them by the throat. I've also met people in substance recovery who picked up gambling as the "safer" substitute, only to end up wrecked in a different way. It's all addiction when the behavior is running the person instead of the person running the behavior.

When the state funds support in a narrow way, people fall through cracks. When the state funds support in a connected way, people get a real chance.

Closing

HB0758 is the kind of legislation that meets people where they truly are. It protects and strengthens problem gambling services, supports peer reimbursement as a legitimate part of treatment and prevention, and recognizes that addiction doesn't show up in clean categories.

I respectfully urge the Committee to issue a **Favorable Report** on HB0758.

Respectfully submitted,

William Merrick, RCPF, CPRS, CCHW