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Erie Times-News (PA)**Addict changes ways to avoid prison**

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Sheri Husted's luck ran out, her lawyer said, as soon as she walked into Presque Isle Downs & Casino in Summit Township shortly after it opened in February 2007.

Husted won, and won some more. But that initial visit -- and many other free-spending trips to the casino over the next five months -- fueled her addiction to gambling.

The defense said Husted, of Waterford, compulsively plowed her winnings back into the slot machines, spending about \$500,000 overall. She was soon \$150,000 in the hole, including losses at casinos in Salamanca, N.Y., and Niagara Falls, N.Y., and ended up on the path to a federal fraud conviction.

"She had the poor fortune to be a winner," said her lead lawyer, **William Weichler**.

Husted, 45, a nurse and a recovering alcoholic, was sentenced Monday to two years of probation and 100 hours of community service for fraudulently obtaining a \$20,000 student loan in July 2007 -- money she used to pay personal expenses as her losses at the casinos crushed her family's finances.

The government said she also used the money to gamble.

"I was desperate at the time, from this gambling," Husted, crying, said in court. "I'm so sorry for what I've put my family through. I am so very sorry."

U.S. District Judge Sean J. McLaughlin sentenced Husted in the recommended guideline range for the felony of wire fraud, to which Husted pleaded guilty in February.

McLaughlin said he considered Husted's lack of a prior record and her full repayment of the loan, which she obtained by forging the name of her son, who was not a college student. McLaughlin also took into account Husted's alcoholism -- she is now sober -- which he said made her more susceptible to a gambling addiction.

"What this case is really about, at its core, is the substitution of one addiction with another," McLaughlin said.

Casinos and court

Husted's case is the second in federal court in Erie directly related to casino gambling since Presque Isle Downs opened. In May 2008, McLaughlin sentenced a Millcreek Township resident, Donald D. Cesare, 71, to four years and five months in federal prison for using a handgun to rob a Millcreek bank of \$6,172 in November 2007.

Evidence showed Cesare, who pleaded guilty, was addicted to gambling and needed money because he had lost \$15,405 at the Seneca Allegany Casino, in Salamanca, in 2007.

Cesare's sentence was in the recommended range for the felonies of bank robbery and armed bank robbery, and his sentence factored in the violent nature of the offenses.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Marshall Piccinini, the chief federal prosecutor in Erie, alluded to the bank-robbery case at Husted's sentencing. He said he expects to see more gambling-related defendants, in federal court and in Erie County Court, because of the nearby casinos.

Referring to Husted's guilty plea, her repayment of the \$20,000 loan and her acceptance of responsibility, Piccinini said "she has done everything right" in her case.

Husted, of the 100 block of Hazel Street, a married mother of three children and a stepmother of two, quickly pleaded guilty. She also waived an indictment, allowing the government to move her case through the system with fewer procedures.

Piccinini said he was impressed that Husted, as part of her recovery, had herself banned from Presque Isle Downs & Casino and the other casinos. The defense said that occurred before the Department of Education's Office of Inspector General started probing the loan.

"It was significant in our consideration," Piccinini said.

He agreed to Husted receiving probation.

Halting a 'downward spiral'

Husted remains a registered nurse, though the defense said the state Board of Nursing can review her license. She lost one nursing job after she pleaded guilty in February, but has been hired elsewhere.

The sentence of probation allows Husted to continue working. Through letters to Judge McLaughlin, Husted's co-workers, friends and family praised her nursing skills, and said her problems with addiction make her a particularly compassionate caregiver.

"Sheri still has another 20 years to be of valuable service to this community," one nurse wrote, "and I pray that is not taken away from her."

Weichler, Husted's lead lawyer, said she has learned from her gambling problems -- how she won some but lost more.

"The more that she lost, the more that she felt that she needed to make up those losses," **Weichler** said in court records. "It was a horrible and downward spiral, which resulted in her losing not only the funds which she had won initially, but also all the moneys that she could put her hands on to try to get back on the winning train."

"Of course, she never did win again."

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