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## **Major public health and social concerns around pokies reopening in NSW**

The NSW Council for Social Service, Wesley Mission and the Alliance for Gambling Reform have come together to express deep concern for a potential tsunami of gambling harm and other public health issues as NSW gambling rooms reopen today.

The three groups are astounded NSW has reopened club and pub poker machines when every other state plans to keep them shut off for at least another month due to COVID-19 infection risks.

They also have major concerns for a lack of preparation by the NSW Government to manage the risks associated with people being exposed to gambling again after a nine-week enforced break.

NCOSS CEO Joanna Quilty said poker machines did their worst damage in vulnerable communities around NSW, causing sometimes irreparable harm to families and individuals.

“NCOSS remains extremely concerned about the harmful impact this form of gambling causes to individuals and the broader community, especially at such a vulnerable time,” she said.

“This decision to reopen poker machines is not a solution to addressing concerns around social isolation, it is a recipe for disaster and our members will no doubt be left to pick up the pieces.”

Wesley Mission CEO, the Rev Keith Garner, said his organisation was bracing for a wave of requests for its gambling counselling services in Sydney, Wollongong, Central Coast and Newcastle.

“In Western Sydney alone around \$450 million has been saved since poker machines were switched off on 23 March,” he said. “That’s a tremendous amount of money that will have been used to pay utility bills, rent and mortgages, and for other essentials, and supporting local businesses.

“It’s difficult to fathom why pubs and clubs with gambling facilities will be allowed to have up to 500 people under one roof with poker machines on and taking money from people, when meanwhile churches and other places of worship are forbidden from having more than 50 people gathered.”

Alliance for Gambling Reform Chief Advocate, the Rev Tim Costello, said he was horrified poker machines were allowed to reopen without consideration for the reforms needed to reduce their harm.

“The NSW Government did a great job of minimising the health impacts of COVID-19 by wisely listening to public health experts. It’s time they did the same with gambling harm,” he said.

“Firstly, the NSW Government must reduce the ridiculous opening hours of poker machine venues, currently up to 18 hours a day. No good is happening at a poker machine venue at 3am, no real hospitality or socialising, and people coming off a period of ‘cold turkey’ since the shutdown will be extremely vulnerable to once again spending hours on machines specifically designed to addict them.

“Secondly, all venue loyalty programs with any connection to gambling must be banned to minimise the risk of inducing vulnerable people back to gambling. Both of these changes are simple measures that can occur at a stroke of the Premier’s pen and they should be introduced as a matter of urgency.

“The third reform needed is the introduction of \$1 maximum bets. That will dramatically slow the rate of poker machines losses, which can be as high as an astonishing \$1200 an hour in NSW.

“All these reforms have been repeatedly recommended by public health experts, gambling counsellors and even the Productivity Commission, but ignored by governments. It’s time to enact them.”

*Please see attached media call sheet for information on an event supporting this release.*

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