theday

Problem gambling in need of study, professor says

Published March 27. 2015 8:22PM Updated March 27. 2015 11:34PM

By Brian Hallenbeck (/apps/pbcs.dll/personalia?ID=b.hallenbeck)

Norwich — Research into problem gambling is about where the study of alcoholism was in the 1950s, an Eastern Connecticut State University professor asserted Friday.

"We still don't know that much," said Tom Broffman, who spoke in connection with Problem Gambling Awareness Month at The Edward and Mary Lord Family Health Center at United Community & Family Services. An assistant professor in Eastern's Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Social work, Broffman has studied problem gambling for years and served as president of the Rhode Island Council on Problem Gambling.

Given the proliferation of casinos in New England, it's a bad time to be in the dark about gambling's downside, he said.

"No federal organization is committed to research on problem gambling the way, for example, the National Institutes of Health is devoted to research on mental disorders," Broffman said. "Despite the growth of gambling, we're not paying careful attention to it. We need to increase funding for research at the federal level ... If we're going to expand gambling, we need to expand resources for gamblers."

He said about 6 percent of the population is believed to be susceptible to problem gambling, whose impacts can range from relatively mild disruptions of a person's life to serious addiction.

The federal government has only looked at gambling's effects twice, in 1976 and 1999, Broffman said, finding in the latter study that the rate of problem gambling doubles within a 50-mile radius of a casino.

In Connecticut, lawmakers are considering a bill that would enable the Indian tribes that own Foxwoods Resort Casino and Mohegan Sun to operate up to three more casinos around the state. The legislation is designed to help the Mashantucket Pequot and Mohegan tribes cope with competition from casinos licensed but not yet built in Massachusetts and New York. Twin River Casino in Lincoln, R.I., also poses a threat.

Problem gambling has been considered a psychiatric disorder since 1987. Only recently has it been classified as an addictive disorder, having more in common with substance abuse than with behavioral disorders. The latest edition of the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, replaces the term "pathological gambling" with "disordered gambling," which Broffman called a welcome change.

Gamblers who exhibit at least four of nine symptoms associated with problem gambling may be diagnosed with a gambling disorder. The criteria include needing to gamble with increasing amounts of money to achieve the same level of excitement; restlessness or irritability when attempting to reduce or stop gambling; frequent preoccupation with gambling; and lying to conceal the extent of one's gambling.

"I've noticed that gamblers have a knack for lying that other people don't," said Broffman, who has dealt with problem gamblers as a social worker.

He said virtually all of the problem gamblers he's worked with dreamed of becoming professional gamblers.

Members of the audience attested to gambling's addictive quality. One man said his play at casino slot machines escalated after he won a $20,000 jackpot, while another said he'd gotten hooked on gambling as a teenager when a longshot he'd backed at the now-defunct Plainfield dog track won a race.

"We need to talk about these things a lot more than we do," Broffman said.

b.hallenbeck@theday.com (mailto:b.hallenbeck@theday.com)

Twitter: @bjhallenbeck