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THE ELECTRONIC JOURNAL OF GAMBLING ISSUES

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### Service Profile

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## The Problem Gambling Program at COSTI Family and Mental Health Services

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### Agency Mandate and Profile

COSTI Immigrant Services is a not-for-profit agency whose mission is to provide educational, social and employment services to help all immigrants in the Greater Toronto Area attain self-sufficiency in Canadian society. To this end, COSTI's 180 staff members provide a range of services including English classes, employment counselling and settlement services in over 40

languages at 12 locations across Toronto and York region. They work in partnerships with approximately 80 mainstream and ethno-specific organizations.

## **Problem Gambling Program Description**

The Problem Gambling Program (PGP) at COSTI Family and Mental Health Services was launched in June 2000. One program component assists Italian-Canadians in identifying and resolving personal and family problems related to gambling through ethno-specific counselling services, including individual, marital, family, support and educational groups, telephone counselling and referrals to credit counselling and psychiatric services. The program's public education component includes awareness raising workshops and presentations on prevention, responsible gambling, risk factors and services available.

## **Problem Gambling Treatment**

COSTI's treatment component is an adapted harm-reduction model. The "mainstream" harm-reduction approach developed within the context of a North American culture is primarily urban, individualistic and literate. However, the roots of the Italian-Canadian culture are primarily rural, collective and oral. Given these realities, every aspect of intervention needs to be examined through this cultural lens. For example, when discussing bailouts, the counsellor must consider that in Italian-Canadian culture, family obligations to care for all its members are central. Parents see no other alternative and feel inadequate and guilty if they are not able to provide a bailout. Adult children contribute to family finances because of a sense of duty and obligation to a parent with gambling problems. Suggesting that spouses protect themselves financially by opening separate bank accounts goes against cultural values and norms, and therefore, needs careful consideration. In this predominantly oral culture, written materials and exercises are sometimes not useful for Italian-Canadian immigrants; counsellors have had to incorporate story telling and analogies to demonstrate concepts. Following through with written homework can be difficult. Counsellors have found that clients prefer to keep a mental log of behaviours. Clients keep track of what triggers their desire to gamble by describing situations that precipitate gambling activity. They also describe how they felt before gambling and how they feel or cope following

gambling.

## Community Development

In addition to providing public education and treatment services for the Italian-Canadian community, the PGP at COSTI also has a community development component that currently works with the Spanish, Polish, Portuguese, Punjabi, Tamil and Vietnamese-speaking communities. These projects include needs assessments using focus groups and questionnaires on cultural attitudes, beliefs and perceptions on gambling and problem gambling. The data that is gathered supports public education initiatives in these communities. COSTI's community development approach in this project involves partnering with community leaders and respected ethno-specific organizations. Focus group questions and questionnaires were developed with the involvement of community leaders and agencies. These same people also help organize focus groups, distribute questionnaires and develop public education initiatives, which include talk shows on ethnic radio programs, articles in ethnic newspapers and presentations. To ensure that culturally sensitive and linguistically appropriate literature is available for public education and counselling, community leaders and organizations helped translate materials and screening tools. Information sessions for settlement counsellors heightened their awareness of problem gambling issues and were conducted along with the Problem Gambling Service (CAMH).

Please contact us for further information about COSTI and the PGP or to arrange a workshop or presentation for a specific group.

*This Service Profile was not peer-reviewed.*

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