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Children, elderly pay price for gamblers' neglect

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By Arthur Hirsch, The Baltimore Sun

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By the time police arrived at the Maryland Live casino parking garage, Mary McGinnis had been sitting in the passenger seat of the red Ford pickup truck for about five hours, waiting as her son played blackjack inside.

The 98-year-old woman, who uses a wheelchair to get around, appeared to be confused about where she was but not physically harmed. Returning to the garage after police called him, Dwight R. McGinnis, her 67-year-old son, was arrested and charged with abuse or neglect of a vulnerable adult, a misdemeanor, according to the police report.

The July 21 incident in Anne Arundel County is the first reported case of a vulnerable adult left unattended in a car outside a Maryland casino since the first casino opened in Cecil County nearly four years ago. Children left unattended in casino parking lots has been more common, but still rare, around the country and in Maryland, where charges have been brought against two people in the most serious incidents.

It's an unusual but troubling and persistent problem casinos face — a potential sign, some say, of gambling addiction.

"This is a pattern we see around the country," said Keith Whyte, executive director of the National Council on Problem Gambling, which focuses on prevention and treatment, referring to neglected children. "We told Maryland to expect this. They should be prepared for it."

Since the Maryland Lottery and Gaming Control Commission started keeping records in October 2011, 13 months after the opening of the state's first slots parlor in Perryville, eight incidents of children left unattended have been reported at Hollywood Casino in Perryville, Maryland Live in Hanover and Ocean Downs on the Eastern Shore.

Casinos are required to file monthly accounts with the commission on an array of incidents, including drunks tossed out, fights, robberies, drug use and "children unattended in vehicles." There is no category for vulnerable adults left unattended.

The American Gaming Association, a casino trade organization, maintains a code of conduct for casino operators, including requiring that employees be trained to deal with unattended children and keep underage people out of casinos.

"We're appalled anytime careless parents and guardians leave their children in cars unattended," said Geoff Freeman, the association's president and CEO, in a statement. He pointed out that casino security officers typically discover children who have been left alone, that parents or the children's caretakers are ultimately responsible, and that this also happens at supermarkets, malls and movie theaters.

Carmen Gonzales, a spokeswoman for Maryland Live, said the casino makes it a "top priority" to safeguard against children left unattended, though she could not discuss specific security arrangements. The security operation includes more than 200 officers, as well as surveillance cameras covering "just about every inch of the facility."

Noah Hirsch, the vice president of marketing for Horseshoe Casino Baltimore, due to open Aug. 26, said signs will be posted reminding customers that it's against the law to leave children in cars on the property, and staff members will monitor the parking garage.

The casinos handle most incidents themselves, sometimes banning people from the casino or letting them go with a warning. For example, Hollywood Casino reported that two children, an infant and a 10-year-old, were found in a vehicle in the parking lot on June 15, 2013. "The mother of the children was located and banned from the casino. She left the property with the children," the report said.

In the most serious case, Alicia Brown of Baltimore County pleaded guilty in May to endangering her 5-year-old daughter, whom she had left in her car at the Maryland Live parking garage for about eight hours on New Year's Eve.

Anne Arundel County police decided to charge Brown because of the length of time the girl was in the car, said spokesman Lt. T.J. Smith. She was charged with four misdemeanor counts: reckless endangerment, neglect of a minor, confining a child and false imprisonment.

Brown was sentenced in Anne Arundel County District Court to five days in jail and three years probation, and was ordered to stay out of casinos. She told Judge Paul A. Hackner that she had learned from the experience and wanted to do better. "I do sincerely love and adore my children," she told Hacker.

Her lawyer, David Putzi, told the court that Brown, a working single mother of two, was sinking into debt, owing back rent and facing a Baltimore Gas and Electric Co. shutoff notice.

Anne Arundel County prosecutor Sandra Howell recommended that Brown be required to go

through counseling. She told the court that Brown, who was playing blackjack at least part of her time at Maryland Live, "put her own selfish desire to gamble ahead of her daughter's needs."

In the other Maryland case resulting in charges, Tabitha D. Cook, 24, of Hyattsville remains the subject of an arrest warrant for confining a child, court records show.

Last May, two children under Cook's care, her 11-year-old sister and a 3-year-old boy, were found at the Maryland Live casino parking garage inside a gray Nissan Maxima while she was inside the casino. They'd been in the car for at least 40 minutes, according to Heather Stone, a spokeswoman for the Anne Arundel County state's attorney's office.

McGinnis, a resident of Raleigh, N.C., was released after being charged in the incident related to his mother. He has a trial date scheduled in October, court records show. The charges carry a maximum penalty of five years in prison or a \$5,000 fine, or both.

Maryland has no specific laws on children left unattended at casinos, but Brown and Cook have been charged under child neglect laws.

McGinnis was similarly charged under laws covering abuse and neglect of vulnerable adults. He did not return a phone call seeking comment for this article.

Reports of vulnerable adults left at casinos are rare. In 2005, the Chicago Tribune reported that a Chicago man was charged with neglect for leaving his 82-year-old mother sitting in the lobby of the Majestic Star Casino in Gary, Ind., for as long as 15 hours. In 2001, according to the anti-gambling group Casino Watch, a woman was charged with leaving her 91-year-old aunt in a locked car for nearly three hours outside a casino in Hammond, Ill.

Children are much more likely to be left unattended, sometimes with terrible consequences.

Casino Watch maintains a list on its website, excerpting 118 articles published about children left alone for hours while their caretakers gambled in casinos from coast to coast in the United States, and in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Greece.

In one case from the summer of 1997, a 10-day-old girl died of dehydration inside her mother's Buick Century while her mother played video blackjack for hours at the State Line Video casino in Savannah, Ga.

While gambling addiction is not always involved in these episodes, "it is frequently the case," said Whyte, of the National Council on Problem Gambling. It is common, he said, for pathological gamblers to lose track of time, to enter a state of mind in which they forget to eat, take medications or even use the bathroom.

The gambler who leaves children unattended while playing in the casino is meeting "some diagnostic criteria" for a gambling problem, said Lori Rugle, program director for the Maryland Center of Excellence on Problem Gambling, as they're neglecting responsibilities because of gambling.

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