
Local

Casinos want customers to stop leaving kids in cars while they gamble

By **Annys Shin** August 7 at 8:07 PM 

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The casino industry is partnering with child safety advocates to try to stop casino customers from leaving children unattended in cars while they gamble — an issue all over the country, including in Maryland, where a 4-year-old was left alone in a parking garage for eight hours at Maryland Live.

The American Gaming Association, whose members include Caesars Entertainment, MGM Resorts, and Penn National Gaming, announced this week that it is working with KidsandCars.org, a Kansas City, Mo.-based group that works to prevent injuries and deaths to children in and around motor vehicles.

AGA chief executive Geoff Freeman said the aim of the partnership is to raise awareness and strengthen the industry's security practices.

“We all hear these stories at grocery stores or theme parks,” he said in an interview. “Many of us are parents of young children. If there is anything we can do to be partners to prevent children from being left in cars, we are glad to lead the way.”

The announcement, which earned praise from child advocates and gambling critics, follows a string of headline-grabbing incidents at casinos across the country, including the one in Maryland on Dec. 31, when a [24-year-old woman](#) from Baltimore was charged with child abuse after police said she left a 4-year-old in a car at Maryland Live in Hanover for eight hours. The temperature that day was in the mid-30s.

Alicia Denice Brown, 24, was charged with child abuse, confined and unattended child and neglect of a minor for allegedly leaving her 4-year-old alone in the car at Maryland Live Casino in Arundel Mills. (Anne Arundel County Police)

It was one of at least six cases of “children unattended

in vehicles” at Maryland’s four casinos since January 2013, state lottery commission and gaming control agency reports show.

And children aren’t the only ones being put at risk. Last month, a North Carolina man left his [98-year-old mother](#) alone in a truck for hours in a parking garage while he gambled at Maryland Live, police said. He was charged with vulnerable adult neglect.

Maryland Live executives did not respond to requests for comment about the new industry initiative. They employ a security force of 200 officers and monitor [a vast surveillance operation](#) that includes security cameras in their parking garage and uncovered surface lots.

Gambling critics have long argued that such incidents are part of the human cost of expanding gambling and may become more widespread as cash-strapped [states continue adding casinos](#) in their quest for tax revenue.

News stories about gamblers leaving children alone in cars at casinos have become “a rite of summer,” said Keith Whyte, executive director of the National Council on Problem Gambling.

“The warning goes out to both patrons and employees — make sure you patrol the parking lots, or have your staff alerted to look out for unattended minors,” he said. “As gambling has gone everywhere, you have to watch for it a lot more.”

On Tuesday, police in Pittsburgh arrested a woman accused of leaving her 9-year-old son in a parked car while she went to redeem a \$10 voucher at Rivers Casino, according to local news accounts. The woman told police she had won the voucher that evening at a Pirates baseball game and that it was

good for only 24 hours.

The casino banned the woman for life, CBS affiliate KDKA reported, and Wednesday issued a statement saying, “We can’t stop parents from making bad decisions; but we are vigilant in our efforts to prevent this from happening.”

A little more than a week ago, an Oakland, Calif., woman was arrested after passers-by spotted her 2- and 3-year-old children strapped into their car seats, alone in a parked car at Casino 580 in Livermore, Calif.

In Illinois, 85 children were left unattended in casino lobbies, parking lots and restaurants between Jan. 1, 2010, and July 31, 2012, a Chicago Sun-Times review of state gaming board records found.

KidsandCars.org has documented at least 208 children left unattended in cars at casinos since 2000, including one child who died, said founder and president Janette Fennell, who added that such incidents regardless of the setting are generally under-reported.

Fennel said her group has not found that casinos make up a disproportionate share of the settings where children are left unattended. But they do pose unique challenges, compared with gas stations or grocery stores.

“People just think, ‘I’ll run in and pay for the gas,’” she said. “What’s different about casinos is that it really is not a situation where you run in real quickly, or say, ‘I am going to gamble for a minute.’”

Children are not allowed on casino floors. Some casinos, such as Coushatta Casino Resort near Kinder, La., and Treasure Island Resort and Casino in Red Wing, Minn., offer on-site child care.

Although not all cases of children left alone in vehicles at casinos involve problem gamblers, Whyte said, certain aspects of [gambling addiction](#) are a factor.

“When they start gambling, the preoccupation, the obsession hijacks their brains in a way that causes them to far exceed their intended limits not just on money but time, and it can lead to tragic consequences,” he said.

Annys Shin has been a staff writer at the Washington Post since 2004.
