

# New bank leader’s path nurtured from rural Midwest roots

By MELISSA CROCKETT MESKE

Some say that growing up in rural America puts a person at a serious disadvantage right from the start gate. Realizing a dream can often mean traveling a longer path along many a country road before arriving at the “big city.” For Gant Harper, there’s a lot about those words that ring true for him.

Harper was recently named president of Saint Louis Bank after working there for over two years. St. Louis Bank’s footprint includes the 209 East Schwartz Street location of Edwardsville Bank, which serves primarily commercial customers throughout the Southwestern Illinois region. Future plans include an expanded presence in the region as well.

But Harper is not new to banking, nor is he new to the region. The same could be said about most of his colleagues at St. Louis Bank and its Edwardsville location. “Our CEO, Travis Liebig, went to SIUE. And he’s passionate about our bank being known as ‘the bank’ in the community. He’s completely committed to that, and our entire team shares in his commitment and vision,” said Harper.

“When The Bank of Edwardsville was bought by Busey, and Clover Leaf by First Mid, there were several of us wanting to see a true community bank come back to Edwardsville,” he said. “St. Louis Bank had started looking at Illinois, and saw a real opportunity to bring a community, hometown bank back to town.”

“After all, if you don’t know the area, you really can’t connect with your



Gant Harper was recently named president of Saint Louis Bank, which encompasses the Edwardsville Bank location and footprint. (Melissa Crockett Meske/Illinois Business Journal)

customers and meet their needs like you can when you know them and where they come from,” Harper added. “Being local, and serving local, keeps us continually in sync with the local economy and with its business environment.”

Community roots serve as the foundation of Edwardsville Bank, with Harper at the helm and further guided by five others who have served customers throughout the Edwardsville region for decades. “In fact, the bulk of Edwardsville Bank’s employees are “alumni” of The Bank of Edwardsville,” said Harper.

The five locally well-known, long-time professional banking professionals that Harper specifically noted that now work at Edwardsville Bank include Justin

Huneke, Jennifer Miller, Kyle David, Tom Baird and Becky Yarbrough. Of these five, all but Miller are also Southern Illinois University Edwardsville alumni.

“Being active in the community, and giving back to it, is another important part of what we do every day,” Harper said further. “We sponsor our employees’ passion projects and those that come from the community. We have started a community fund and scholarship opportunities as well, through Saint Louis Bank’s foundation. Employees are also given two days a year of paid time to volunteer in the community.”

Saint Louis Bank is now nearing the \$1 billion asset mark; four years ago, it was at \$450 million. A group of investors

led by Liebig bought Saint Louis Bank in 2018 for \$30 million, with plans to attract small to mid-size businesses with up to \$50 million in annual revenue.

Liebig previously shared that the combined job of president and CEO at Saint Louis Bank had become too big for one person, so it was split. Liebig continued as its CEO, with Harper named as president.

“We’ve also recently brought on a new director of community development to further demonstrate how sincere we are about our commitment to being a true community partner,” said Harper. He shared that Cara Spencer, former St. Louis mayoral candidate and current alderman, had been tapped to fill the role of senior vice president of community and economic development.

Harper’s career path has spanned the industries. He spent a decade along the path as a CPA. He has also held roles in motorcycle dealerships, contracting, and manufacturing companies. As a banker, his diverse career journey and first-hand insights into these various industries have allowed him to better understand the needs of the community and its bank customers.

Not bad for one small-town boy growing up in rural Woodburn, Macoupin County, and graduating from nearby Bunker Hill High School, about 20 miles north of Edwardsville, Ill., where his roots still run deep.

*EDITOR’S NOTE: Do you have a leader whose story you’d like to share? Send an email to IBJ Editor Melissa Crockett Meske for future story consideration, [macmeske@ibjonline.com](mailto:macmeske@ibjonline.com).*

## Illinois DHS releases first-ever statewide assessment of gambling

Department invests in related prevention, treatment, and recovery services

The Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) released the first-of-its-kind statewide assessment of problem gambling in Illinois in mid-June.

Commissioned by IDHS and conducted by researchers at Health Resources in Action (HRIA), the assessment reports on the prevalence of different types of gambling in the state, the availability of treatment and other services, the prevalence of problem gambling among different groups, and overall attitudes about gambling.

IDHS is committed to expanding services and continuing to raise awareness about recovery options available through the website WeKnowTheFeeling.org, 1-800-GAMBLER, or by texting “ILGamb” to 53342.

The study found that 68 percent of adult Illinoisans reported gambling in the past year, with the State lottery being the most popular form. Following legalization and expansion, gambling at video gaming terminals and online sports betting showed significant growth over time.

While most adults engage in responsible gambling behaviors, some experience a significant impact on their economic, social, and mental well-being, developing problem gambling and gambling disorder.

Statewide, the assessment found:

- 3.8 percent of adult Illinoisans -- approximately 383,000 people -- are considered to have a gambling problem
- An additional 7.7 percent -- approximately 761,000 people -- are at risk of developing a gambling problem

“It is so important that we have data on the patterns and depth of gambling across the state. I hope this report will be used to advance and expand effec-

tive treatment and recovery options for people experiencing problem gambling disorder throughout Illinois,” said IDHS Secretary Grace B. Hou. “For those who do struggle with gambling disorder, they seldom seek help and often hide their behavior from family members.”

As the number of individuals in need of gambling treatment services continues to rise, IDHS has made significant investments in gambling services, including \$10 million budgeted for State Fiscal Year 23.

“We hope that the findings of this assessment will provide much-needed information for people working on prevention and treatment of problem gambling in Illinois, which will help them make data-informed decisions on how best to assist individuals on their road to recovery,” said Dr. Hannah Carliner, of Health Resources in Action, lead author of the study. “The broad scope of this assessment also enables it to be used as a baseline measure for future assessments to track changes over time regarding the prevalence of gambling and problem gambling, and availability and use of services,” she said.

The assessment was ordered in response to legislation that expanded access to gambling across the state. The 250-page report includes 10 recommended strategies the State and partners can take to address problem gambling amidst this expansion. These include providing consistent funding toward problem gambling prevention and services, increasing awareness about problem gambling and its symptoms, and improving access to holistic treatment for problem gambling.

“These recommendations are based on the needs of Illinoisans identified through this assessment and informed by best practices from other states to provide a strategic initiative for the future of gambling disorder recovery and prevention in Illinois,” said Laura Garcia, Director of the Division of Substance

Use Prevention and Recovery (SUPR) at IDHS. “We are using these findings to develop strategies to increase awareness about problem gambling; support responsible gambling; and expand prevention, treatment, and recovery services throughout the state,” she said.

IDHS continues to work with gambling providers to expand outreach and awareness of the problems that gambling can cause and to connect impacted people with the services that support recovery. IDHS, through SUPR, has funded 26 gambling treatment programs through SFY22. Twenty-one of them provide outpatient treatment and outreach services to the communities they serve.

SUPR has also helped providers prepare for an increase in problem gamblers in need of treatment. In State Fiscal Year 2021, 13,037 assessments were conducted by treatment providers, representing a 440 percent increase over the previous year. The significant growth

was followed by a 185 percent increase over the previous year in the number of individuals receiving gambling treatment.

Over the past two years, over 245 clinicians have been trained to provide gambling disorder treatment services in Illinois. This year, SUPR will provide monthly webinars focused on gambling disorders, a two-day Summit on Problem Gambling, as well as offer new opportunities for participation in the 30-hour Gambling Counselor Training.

The State of Illinois provides various intervention, treatment, and recovery resources, including the Illinois Problem Gambling Helpline, a telephone and web resource with specialists trained to connect people with treatment and recovery support services. If you or someone you know is experiencing problems with gambling, contact the State’s Gambling Helpline at [weknowthefeeling.org](http://weknowthefeeling.org), call 1-800-GAMBLER, or text “ILGamb” to 53342.

JOURNAL PRINTING

By BETTER NEWSPAPERS

• Business Cards • Multi Part Forms • Banners

• Blueprints • Yard Signs • Posters • Booklets

• Postcards • Invitations • Envelopes

• Programs • Letterheads • Stationery

• And Much Much More!

Contact Charlie Huelsmann

[chuelsmann@better-newspapers.com](mailto:chuelsmann@better-newspapers.com)

618.973.0414