

Too many workers exposed to secondhand smoke



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How much longer are Pennsylvania leaders going to treat thousands of casino, tavern, and other workers like second-class citizens when it comes to protecting them from deadly secondhand smoke?

Some 3 ½ years after the state enacted its indoor smoke-free law, those employees continue to be exposed to cigarette smoke on the job at 2,800 workplaces that weren't covered by the 2008 ban. It's time to close the loopholes, which the smoke-free law author — state Sen. Stewart Greenleaf (R., Montgomery) — has been trying to do.

The bill hasn't gotten a hearing yet, but the legislative session ending in November shouldn't pass without action. Until then, smoking exemptions will apply to hundreds of corner bars that serve little food. It's on the gambling floors of casinos, though, where the most employees and patrons are exposed.

The loopholes were seen as the political price to get Harrisburg to join New Jersey and other leaders in the smoke-free effort in safeguarding millions of people who dine out, visit public offices, or spend eight hours a day at office buildings.

Casino operators, in particular, waged a winning argument with lawmakers that revenues would suffer — and, thus, the state's take in taxes — if patrons couldn't smoke. But the exemptions never made sense on health grounds, since medical experts have linked secondhand smoke to cancer and other life-threatening ailments.

For the bartenders, servers, casino dealers, and other workers, that's particularly unfair. Given high unemployment in a down economy, they have little choice but to work in smoking environments, like it or not.

The economic argument of the casinos and small-tavern owners has been weakened by the experience in states whose smoke-free laws didn't exempt them. In New Jersey, certainly, there's no sign that corner bars are any the worse. In Delaware, officials have determined their smoke-free casinos have not lost money as a result of the ban. While Atlantic City casinos fought hard to restore smoking sections, it's a sign of the times that the \$2.4 billion Revel Casino will open in May as a smoke-free resort by choice. Ohio's new casinos will be smoke-free by law, as are gaming facilities in New York State.

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