

## Inquirer Editorial: A risk casinos can do without

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The owners of Pennsylvania and Atlantic City casinos granted ill-advised exemptions from indoor smoking bans contend that they must look to smokers for a sizable share of the pot - and, thus, the state tax revenues generated by gambling. But what if smoke-filled casinos are triggering a haul of a different kind - of patrons sickened and, in extreme cases, having to be carted off to a hospital?

Troubling recent findings from a study of the impact of secondhand smoke in casinos drive home the commonsense notion that smoke-free gambling would be healthier for patrons and employees alike.

The study charted ambulance runs to Colorado casinos before and after the state banned smoking inside them. Once the state's two-dozen casinos went smoke-free, ambulance calls rapidly dropped 19 percent, according to researchers at the University of California, San Francisco. That closely tracked the reduction in emergency medical calls reported at a sample of Colorado workplaces, restaurants, bars, and the like where smoking had been prohibited.

While similar data isn't available for casinos in this region, the Colorado findings offer further evidence that the best policy for public health would be to revoke most if not all smoke-free exemptions.

Efforts to do so were jump-started in Harrisburg over the summer by State Sen. Stewart Greenleaf (R., Montgomery) and State Rep. Mario Scavello (R., Monroe), whose legislation would expand the state's indoor smoking ban to all public settings.

The lawmakers' initiative becomes more urgent given the just-revealed threat of reduced funding for smoking-cessation efforts under the state's tobacco settlement.

At the 2,800 Pennsylvania establishments where smoking is still allowed - ranging from corner bars to private social clubs to truck stops with shower facilities - extending the ban would protect the health of thousands of employees now treated as second-class citizens. The risk to these workers and their patrons is clear given the estimated 46,000 adult deaths each year from heart disease, and 3,400 from lung cancer, attributable to secondhand smoke.

A driving force behind the state's 2008 Clean Indoor Air Act, Greenleaf deserves credit for his persistence in trying to close the law's gaping loopholes. While millions of restaurant and bar patrons, office workers, and others have been able to breathe smoke-free air over the past few years, public-health officials have only become more adamant that, as the U.S. surgeon general has noted, "smoke-free workplace policies are the only effective way to eliminate secondhand smoke exposure."

Leveling the playing field with blanket smoking bans in both states' casinos would be the best strategy. But failing a concerted effort in Trenton to ban smoking in Atlantic City - where gambling revenues have plummeted in the face of new competition - Harrisburg lawmakers need to do what's best for gamblers and casino workers in the commonwealth.

As for casino operators, surely they would rather have their patrons head off after a day at the slots and tables by car - not by ambulance.

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