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Harrisburg got this one right

ERIKAGRACE DAVIES & ANTONY DAVIES (MAILTO:OPINION@TRIBWEB.COM?SUBJECT=RE: HARRISBURG GOT THIS ONE RIGHT STORY ON TRIBLIVE.COM) | Friday, March 17, 2017, 8:57 p.m.

Pennsylvania officials have demonstrated good governance by reversing their earlier decision to force disabled workers to leave sheltered workshops and compete for jobs on the open market. Even Gov. Tom Wolf, a strong proponent of prohibiting physically or mentally disabled workers in sheltered workshops from working for less than his proposed \$12 minimum wage, has changed his tune.

In sheltered workshops, individuals with physical or mental disabilities work in a supportive environment, at their own pace, surrounded by respectful friends, co-workers and supervisors. The workers gain valuable experience that can help some of them eventually join the larger community of workers outside sheltered workshops.

But many disabled workers simply can't work at the speed necessary to produce enough value to offset the hourly minimum wage that employers are required to pay. Those workers who can't work fast enough get shut out of jobs, and they end up earning nothing. This is where sheltered workshops come in.

Part of what enables sheltered workshops to remain financially viable is that they qualify for the "piecework" exemption — an exception to minimum-wage law that allows employers to pay workers by the task rather than by the hour. Piecework rules give workers the ability to provide value for an employer regardless of whether they can work quickly or slowly.

What our state officials got right was the realization that disabled workers and their caregivers are better able to judge what's best for them rather than a cadre of government officials. No matter how smart, no matter how well-meaning, it is simply impossible for policymakers to obtain enough information to make better decisions for people than those people can make for themselves.

While this is a victory for disabled workers, and a welcome breath of fresh air out of Harrisburg, policymakers must remain ever vigilant. It is natural for people to confuse the power to make decisions with the ability to make good decisions. And the confusion becomes more pronounced the more power those people wield.

When they make decisions for others, policymakers rarely have to live with the consequences of those decisions. Policymakers who ban vaping probably aren't desperately looking for a way to quit smoking. Those who vote to maintain our state system of liquor stores probably aren't dissatisfied with the limited selection, higher prices and reduced customer service endemic to monopolies.

When they make decisions for others, policymakers can't take into account the specific needs and circumstances of the people for whom they make decisions. Most policymakers who vote to keep marijuana illegal don't feel the physical pain of chemotherapy or the mental anguish of depression. Surely some are aware that marijuana alleviates pain, but policymakers don't even know the people's names for whom they are making decisions, let alone those people's specific needs and circumstances.

Good governance is about preventing people from harming each other, but otherwise leaving them alone to make decisions for themselves. For a brief moment, Harrisburg discovered good governance. Let us all hope the lesson sticks.

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