

The Daily Telegram

EDITORIAL: All employees deserve strong health protections

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Wisconsin lawmakers concluded their 2007 session Tuesday by passing some important measures but leaving some behind.

The so-called “Frankenstein” veto was approved and advances to voters in April. And lawmakers decided the state, not localities, should license cable television providers. More on those issues later.

Action to further regulate smoking, however, fell by the wayside. With Minnesota and Illinois enacting bans affecting bars and restaurants, Wisconsin has become an island that promotes poor worker health.

The lack of action was expected. Wisconsin’s Tavern League, which lobbies for about 5,200 members in the liquor industry, has spent years fighting the ban, in localities and statewide. Few lawmakers relish the prospect of angering the trade group.

Although the Wisconsin Restaurant Association supports a ban, Tavern League members contend it would negatively affect business. No doubt, either side could cite studies that prove their viewpoint, even though the studies disagree.

But one point is beyond dispute: People who work in taverns, whether bartenders or waitresses, must breathe secondhand smoke — and lots of it. They deserve the same protection as people who work in other industries.

Smokers argue they also have rights — and they deserve a place to enjoy their habit. That’s true. If someone can produce a tavern design that protects employees, then there’s no reason to prevent people from smoking there and harming their health, if that’s their choice.

So far, however, that design doesn’t exist. At this juncture, the state knowingly allows tavern and restaurant workers to be exposed to hazardous conditions. That’s unconscionable, and it isn’t allowed in other industries.

It’s time for government to do its job and protect workers.