

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

Opinion

Editorial

Attempting to limit voting rights is always wrong

Leo Tolstoy, the great Russian writer, once observed that all happy families are alike, while each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

Could a similar observation be made about legislation?

Good pieces of legislation are always alike in that whether they are short and straightforward or long and enormously complex, the goal of the legislation is to clarify a legal point, to fix a problem, and to improve people's lives in some way—small or large. Bad legislation, on the other hand, can be bad in a lot of different ways.

Consider House Bill 1300, also known as the Voting Rights Protection Act, which was approved by lawmakers in the State Senate and State House along party lines—and then subsequently vetoed by Gov. Tom Wolf. The name would seem to suggest that the goal of the legislation was to actually protect the voting rights of Pennsylvanians, but instead the bill would have made it more difficult for citizens to exercise one of their most precious rights.

Provisions in the bill, which are being promoted by specious special interest groups in states across the country, would have cost Pennsylvania taxpayers tens of millions of dollars while limiting, not expanding, their ability to vote.

Minorities and low-income voters would have been hurt the most by the legislation. These are groups that already don't have their voices heard in large enough numbers at the ballot box. Throwing up additional roadblocks to prevent people from voting is the exact opposite of what lawmakers should be doing when they are "at work" serving the people of the state.

In a fair, logical world, voters would send a clear message to the lawmakers who attempted to restrict voting rights by voting them out of office. But because so many lawmakers are from gerrymandered or otherwise impossibly "safe" districts, most will never pay a political price for their failures.

Look, election reform needs to take place. Changing technologies and societal changes require constant updates to the rules that govern when and how we vote. We need fair, secure, accurate elections where every vote is counted. That has to be the objective. And that shouldn't change. It doesn't matter which party is in the majority at any given time.

The counties across the state have said that they need legislation that will allow county election officials to pre-canvass. Counties have also expressed a need for legislation that offers flexibility and clarification on mail-in ballot application deadlines.

All citizens—whether they are Republicans or Democrats or Libertarians or independents—should be able to agree that every eligible voter should have the opportunity to make their voices heard at the ballot box on Election Day. Your vote is just as precious as ours. And it should be easy and convenient to vote, just as long as, in the process of making it easy and convenient, we don't open the door to corruption. So be wary of any lawmaker who wants to take away voting rights of citizens. Limiting voting rights is always wrong.

Guest column

Pandemic proves value of homecare

By Thomas Ryan

Doctors, nurses, and the scientists who created COVID-19 vaccines have all emerged as heroes during the pandemic, but there is another, underappreciated group that's been crucial to the country's pandemic response: those who provide home-based medical equipment, services, and care.

Without fanfare or headlines, home medical equipment providers saved thousands and improved millions of lives. And they could transform the way we care for our elderly and infirm -- for the better. In order to fulfill that promise, home medical equipment providers must be paid commensurate with the value they deliver for their patients and the broader healthcare system.

The people most vulnerable to the coronavirus are the elderly. And the most vulnerable among them, tragically, have been those living in nursing homes.

By treating people at home, home medical equipment providers kept millions of seniors safe from COVID-19.

Home-based care also relieved pressure on frontline healthcare workers and clinical facilities, which have been nearly overrun several times during the pandemic.

As the pandemic begins to wane, homecare's importance will not. Rather, it will join remote work and contactless delivery as one of the staples of modern life.

The COVID-era surge in homecare is only an acceleration of long-developing trends. First, our society is aging. Seniors are living longer, more active, and independent lives than ever before.

Second, homecare is less expensive -- often considerably so -- than institutional care. So it represents a promising strategy for tackling our nation's health cost crisis.

In recent months, hospital discharge rates have started returning to pre-pandemic levels. But when seniors leave the hospital, they're increasingly going home, not to a nursing facility.

Doctors are becoming more supportive. According to a 2020 survey by William Blair, the propor-

tion of doctors preferring to send patients to home health agencies over nursing homes rose from 54 percent to 81 percent during the pandemic.

All told, more than three in four seniors view homecare as the preferred way to age, according to an AARP survey. Families should be able care for their loved ones in the setting that works best for them -- and fosters the highest quality of life.

Unfortunately, bad policy stands in the way of this vision. While our aging population and its preference for homecare should mean that home medical equipment suppliers are thriving, nearly 40 percent of them have closed their doors over the last decade.

Why? A faulty Medicare program is unsustainably cutting their reimbursement rates.

Congress and the Biden administration must update these rates without delay. An increase that considers increased product costs and new operational requirements is long overdue. The industry needs to be able to guarantee salaries for its skilled workers. Otherwise,

we're setting seniors up for failure.

COVID-19 taught us that home may be the safest place to receive care, but policies that don't reflect the true cost of care for life-saving equipment represent a failure to heed that lesson. Without properly funded homecare, we can expect lower-quality outcomes for patients, increased hospital readmissions, and an overall increase in health costs.

The trend toward home-based health care is only going to accelerate. The underappreciated heroes who helped us through the pandemic will now pivot to helping Baby Boomers age and helping their families care for them. Homecare is good for patient well being, family happiness, and government budgets.

Washington needs to find a way to make the system take care of homecare providers as much as they take care of us.

Thomas Ryan is president and CEO of the American Association for Homecare (aahomecare.org). This piece originally ran in the *International Business Times*.

Repairing the community after the pandemic

By Luke Zubrod

As Kennett Square emerges from the pandemic, we have so much to be thankful for.

Chester County boasts some of the highest vaccination rates in the country that have allowed local businesses to shift back into a more normal gear.

Almost all of Kennett's small businesses appear to have weathered the storm, thanks to their own grit as well as significant community and governmental support. Throughout the pandemic, community organizations worked together to support our most vulnerable on issues like food and housing security, as well as education. Organizations throughout the county also collaborated in new ways to share African American stories, underscoring the complexities of history and its shared human struggles as part of a countywide Juneteenth commemoration.

While each of these is worthy of celebration, they come with challenges that have only grown since the pandemic began that include adolescent mental health concerns, digital equity and housing affordability.

Adolescent mental health concerns, including suicidal ideation, had already been growing at alarming rates over the last decade, and these trends were exacerbated during the pandemic. In response, local counseling group The Peacemaker Center is hiring additional counselors and making plans to expand their Kennett operation to meet growing demand. Johnny Johnston, campus pastor for Willowdale Chapel's Jenersville cam-

pus, recently raised the issue of depression in a congressional message. His main goal was "to help normalize the conversation" within families.

The pandemic also revealed deficits that made learning more difficult for some, particularly as a result of uneven access to high-speed internet -- a necessity when students were forced to learn from home for much of this year. The Southern Chester County Opportunity Network's (SCCON) digital equity project is aimed at advocating for investments which would ensure everyone has basic access to this increasingly essential resource.

According to the National Association of Realtors, low borrowing rates and a shortage of properties boosted home prices nationwide by an average of 24 percent over the course of the last year -- complicating an already difficult challenge in the region with housing affordability. The issue of affordability, long a concern in Kennett Square Borough, is a difficult one to solve because the issues driving affordability in a place like Kennett -- including pandemic-induced migration away from large cities -- are outside the realm of local control.

However, while there are no silver bullets to the issue of housing affordability, towns like Kennett do have some levers of control. One such lever is reducing the surprisingly high cost municipal parking requirements place on housing development -- such as that which is likely to be built in the coming years at the sizeable land parcel once occupied by NVE. A recent study calculates

that parking requirements -- municipal mandates to have a certain number of parking spaces, for example, per developed unit of housing -- raise housing costs by 13 percent for families without cars. Another study cited costs ranging from \$24,000 to \$35,000 per required parking space. Additionally, because property taxes generally orient around buildings, an excess

of parking in a town limits the town's ability to generate tax revenue to fund municipal expenditures.

For these and other reasons, many municipalities have reduced or entirely eliminated minimum parking requirements, among other parking-related issues. Seattle, Buffalo, Spartanburg, Minneapolis and Fayetteville are among those that have eliminated parking minimums altogether. Others, including Cornelius, N.C. and Fargo, N.D. have reduced their parking requirements by half, and Cincinnati has eliminated parking minimums in certain neighborhoods.

It is not just far-flung places that have reexamined their approaches to parking, but also places closer to home like West Chester and Phoenixville. Two years ago, West Chester created a Zoning Update Task Force that included members of their planning commission,

borough staff and outside consultants. Among this group's proposed changes was to conduct a parking analysis that would lead to eliminating unnecessary parking, rather than prescribe a fixed number of parking spots for developments. Phoenixville has done the same, and has eliminated parking requirements on their main street, among others.

As we emerge from the hardships of pandemic life and slowly resume our normal way of life, we have cause to revel in this sunny moment. However, we also have work to do in tending to the hardships exacerbated or revealed by the pandemic. Some of those hardships -- e.g., mental health -- orient around the family and addressing them starts with asking questions and normalizing conversations about depression, anxiety and suicide.

Others -- including housing affordability and digital equity -- require community-oriented solutions. Especially on these community concerns, the time has come to begin elevating these issues in our dialogue with each other.

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Clarification

In the Living History piece that appeared in the June 30 edition of the *Chester County Press*, the photo "Pennsylvania Landscape" © 2021 Andrew Wyeth/Artists Rights Society was identified as a work by N.C. Wyeth, when it should have been identified as a work by Andrew Wyeth. We apologize for any confusion this may have caused.