

Pennsylvania, like the nation, is dealing with a public health and economic crisis never seen before. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, President Trump has instituted an “all-of-government” approach to mitigating the effects of the virus, specifically through partnerships with the private sector that have improved the efficiency and effectiveness of the federal government’s response. Unfortunately, some governors have deviated from this path in developing plans for their states. Many had the right intentions but results that didn’t match. This is especially true in Pennsylvania, where Governor Tom Wolf has operated with little transparency and failed to be inclusionary of important industry stakeholders, county commissioners, state legislators and local community leaders as he shut down the state.

When the Governor released his initial declaration that all businesses not deemed “life-sustaining” must close their physical locations, it was unclear how this definition was developed and how it would apply to Pennsylvania’s diverse economy. Still, nearly two months later, no clarity has been provided. Businesses were given little notice to apply for an exemption waiver, causing panic and confusion for employers and employees across the commonwealth. Further, there were wild inconsistencies in the Wolf Administration’s determinations. For example, one business would be deemed life-sustaining while another in the same industry but in a neighboring county, was not. Most of the supply chain to the so-called life-sustaining businesses was shut down. Pennsylvania was also the only state that, until May 1st, forbid outdoor construction. Small businesses have paid a steep price as they have been forced to shutter their doors, while larger big-box retailers selling similar products remain open.

After more than eight weeks, several counties citing professional, data-based reasoning began expressing a desire to safely reopen. In response, the Governor publicly called them “cowards,” and threatened to withhold federally-provided coronavirus-related funding. Rather than dismissing them, why not hear them out? County commissioners and state legislators are in constant contact with dozens of their constituents each day - they understand the serious nature of this crisis and the economic ramifications a prolonged shutdown has already had on local livelihoods. The Governor’s response was disturbing and illustrated a lack of understanding of the concerns of hardworking employees and employers who want to safely return to work. Elected officials must have the wisdom to admit that decisions made behind closed doors can be misguided. Fortunately, it is not too late.

Pennsylvania should pivot from its current path towards one that is based upon health and safety and inclusionary of the private sector. Businesses value their employees and have a vested interest in their health and well-being. Why not bring them to the table? Everyone wants to protect the public health, but they also want to provide for their families. To frame this as a choice between public health or economic health is a false dichotomy - they are not mutually exclusive and framing them as such is counterproductive. The new normal we will return to will undoubtedly look different than before this pandemic. Working with the business community to develop safety standards to reopen will help protect lives **and** livelihoods. Data, rather than arbitrary dates and regional maps, should drive the planning to ensure those with low risk can return to work, while the high risk continue to exercise increased caution. For instance, 68% of COVID-19 fatalities across the state have come from nursing homes. By following the data and a high level of workplace health and safety standards, the state can direct resources properly, effectively minimize, if not eliminate, future outbreaks, and create a safe and uniform working

environment for our people. Government should not be picking winners or losers. Diligent safety standards for all.

Pennsylvanians have been largely confined for eight weeks with no end in sight and are rightly frustrated and anxious. A desire to reopen is not rooted in a rejection of scientists and public health experts, but is based on the understanding that if these policies continue, there may be no life to go back to. We cannot let livelihoods die. There is a smarter plan and it must be adopted. Now is the time to change course, be receptive to better ideas and implement a plan that gets the commonwealth safely back to work, before it is too late.

(712 Words)