Dear Maryland PIRG member,

Thank you for opening this report on our action, progress and results in 2020—a year that many Americans wish they could forget.

As the nation grappled with COVID-19, many of our national network’s advocates and organizers turned their focus to strategies designed to save as many lives as possible.

Our staff and many of our supporters joined public health and medical groups in urging federal leaders to centralize the medical supply chain to ensure critical supplies reached areas most in need. As cases surged in the summer and fall, we joined health care workers in calling on states and federal leaders to put public health first by scaling back reopening until the virus could be suppressed. And, with the announcement of promising vaccine trial results as the year came to a close, we organized online forums with expert panelists to identify strategies for vaccinating as many people as possible as quickly as possible.

Meanwhile, PIRG’s consumer watchdogs continued to monitor the marketplace and give consumers resources to protect themselves. After a report by U.S. PIRG Education Fund revealed rampant price surges for hand sanitizer and masks on Amazon in March 2020, for example, we started a call for the world’s largest online marketplace to adopt controls to protect Americans from price surges for essential items.

As COVID-19 cases climbed in the spring of 2020, it became vitally important for hospitals to keep ventilators in service as much as possible. Our Right to Repair campaign mobilized quickly to call on manufacturers to lower barriers to ventilator repair, and, in April, several major manufacturers did exactly that.

All of these efforts—in addition to our ongoing work to cut down on plastic waste, reduce our exposure to toxic chemicals, and more—were made possible by your support. Our country will always face challenges. As the American people decide how to meet them, it’s our job to offer a voice for the public interest. We’re grateful to you and so many others for granting us this privilege.

Thank you.

Emily Scarr
State Director
Zero out toxics

We shouldn’t have to worry about coming into contact with toxic chemicals in our daily lives. In 2020, Marylanders saw wins for a healthier marketplace as our state banned harmful flame-retardant chemicals and Baltimore enacted restrictions on toxic pesticides. But there’s still more work ahead to make sure our future is toxic-free.

**Bill to protect families and firefighters from toxic chemicals becomes law**

**MAY 18, 2020:** Maryland continues to be a national leader in protecting its residents from harmful chemicals in consumer products.

On May 7, Gov. Larry Hogan allowed the Family and Firefighter Protection Act to go into effect without his signature. The bill—sponsored by state Sen. Guy Guzzone and state Del. Bonnie Cullison and backed by Maryland PIRG, other public health advocates, and firefighters across the state—restricts the use of chemical flame retardants in furniture, children’s products and mattresses.

Research shows that these chemicals accumulate in our bodies and are linked to serious health problems. Moreover, these chemicals aren’t effective at reducing harm from fire, and when they burn, they release cancer-causing chemicals, endangering firefighters’ health.

“There is no reason to continue to use flame-retardant chemicals in children’s products, furniture or mattresses,” said Maryland PIRG State Director Emily Scarr. “They are toxic and there are safer, non-toxic alternatives readily available. We applaud the Maryland General Assembly for passing this bill.”

**Baltimore moves to put public health over toxic pesticides**

**OCT. 27, 2020:** Baltimore is taking action to protect city residents’ health from harmful pesticides.

On Oct. 5, the Baltimore City Council passed a bill that restricts the use of three pervasive and toxic pesticides in Baltimore City: chlorpyrifos, neonicotinoids and glyphosate (the main ingredient in the popular weed killer Roundup). Glyphosate and chlorpyrifos have been linked to severe health issues including cancer and brain damage in children, respectively, while neonicotinoids have been linked to a decline in bee populations, which threatens our ecosystems and food production.

“It’s absurd that weed killers, designed to make our lives more convenient and food production more efficient, should be allowed to put public health at risk,” said Emily Scarr. “We’re glad the city is taking action to protect Baltimore families.”
Responding to COVID-19

The coronavirus pandemic poses the greatest threat to Americans’ health and safety in a century. But through the course of 2020, the United States lacked a coordinated federal response to the crisis.

As COVID-19 cases started to climb, our national network assembled a team of advocates and policy experts to research and elevate strategies for protecting public health and turning the tide on the pandemic. Working with health care professionals, and with the support of people like you, we advocated for measures to suppress the virus, increase testing, keep health care workers safe, protect consumers and more. Here’s some of the work that you helped make possible in this unprecedented year.

A call to shut down, start over and do it right

JULY 2020: Hundreds of thousands of Americans have died from COVID-19. With a more effective response, we could have saved many of those lives.

But we failed to shut down properly, failed to stamp out the virus, and rushed to reopen the economy before we were prepared to contain future outbreaks with testing and tracing.

Between mid-July and the end of August—as COVID cases rose—nearly 1,400 medical professionals signed an open letter calling on then-President Donald Trump and the nation’s governors to again shut down non-essential activity and to this time stamp out the virus and scale up containment before reopening in measured increments.

The letter, organized by our national network, earned widespread coverage by news outlets including CNN, Forbes and USA Today.
“Mr. Trump, federal administration, honorable governors: We remind you that history has its eyes on you,” wrote Matt Wellington, director of our national network’s public health campaigns, in the letter.

PIRG to federal lawmakers: Ramp up COVID testing, PPE production

NOV. 24, 2020: As COVID-19 cases and deaths reached new highs in November 2020, Americans desperately needed stronger action to suppress the coronavirus and protect the health care workers who protect all of us.

Our national network urged federal lawmakers to provide at least $75 billion to help states ramp up their testing efforts and to boost production of personal protective equipment (PPE) by requiring the Trump administration to fully utilize the Defense Production Act.

Scaled-up testing allows states to catch isolated cases before they become full-scale outbreaks. Meanwhile, increased PPE production helps ensure that frontline workers have the supplies they need to protect themselves and their patients from the virus.

“At Americans have sacrificed so much since March, but our leaders haven’t stepped up to meet that sacrifice,” said Matt Wellington. “Our best defenses against COVID-19 are widespread testing and sufficient PPE, yet we still have nowhere near enough of either.”

Panel experts discussed COVID-19 vaccination with U.S. PIRG’s Matt Wellington

NOV. 16, 2020: In November 2020, pharmaceutical companies Moderna and Pfizer announced promising results for their COVID-19 vaccines, prompting questions about what the public should expect and when.

To answer these and other questions, our national network’s public health campaigns director, Matt Wellington, was joined by public health experts Drs. Syra Madad, Saad B. Omer, Krutika Kuppalli and Trudy Larson for the first in an ongoing series of panel discussions.

The experts discussed trial results for the emerging vaccines, obstacles to distributing the vaccines across the country, and what to expect once vaccines are rolled out to the public.

“Our biggest vulnerability is not the vaccine anymore. Increasingly, it’s vaccination,” said Dr. Omer, director of the Yale Institute for Global Health. “We should demand the same level of rigor in vaccine acceptance science as we demand in terms of vaccine development science.”

Video of the full panel discussions can be viewed on our national partner U.S. PIRG’s Facebook page.
Every American has the fundamental right to vote and have that vote counted. In 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic posed serious challenges to that right, Maryland PIRG advocated for measures that would keep our 2020 elections safe and accessible to all. We also made progress in our work to enact small donor empowerment programs that will bring power back to the people in our elections.

Maryland PIRG helps ensure that all Marylanders can vote safely in the state’s primary

NOV. 15, 2020: Thanks in large part to Maryland PIRG and our allies, our state’s 2020 primary and general elections were safer and more accessible.

Maryland PIRG—alongside Common Cause Maryland, ACLU of Maryland, the League of Women Voters of Maryland, Baltimore NAACP, and Disability Rights Maryland—made frequent recommendations to Gov. Larry Hogan and the State Board of Elections on how to ensure Marylanders could participate in elections while protecting their health and the health of election workers in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Throughout the summer and fall, these groups worked to ensure voters had access to safe and robust options to cast their ballots, including mail-in voting, early voting and Election Day voting, and educated Marylanders virtually on the new systems for voting during the pandemic.

“Democracy is an essential service,” said Maryland PIRG State Director Emily Scarr. “Everyone should have the chance to vote, and do so safely.”

Baltimore’s effort to get big money out of politics picks up momentum

DEC. 15, 2020: Wealthy donors have long had an outsized influence on our elections. In Baltimore County, though, lawmakers are working to put small donors front and center.

In the November general election, Baltimore County voters passed Question A, a charter amendment to establish the Citizens’ Election Fund and Commission. With growing public concern over big money in politics, the new small donor campaign finance system for County Executive and Council races is a monumental step toward more inclusive, fair and representative campaigns in Baltimore County.

In the weeks leading up to the vote, Maryland PIRG and more than a dozen other organizations pounded the virtual pavement to drum up support for the amendment.

“Voters have sent a clear message that Baltimore County residents should have a voice in local government regardless of how much money they have,” said Emily Scarr. “The County Council should move swiftly to finalize the fair elections program.”

Election modernization means making sure everyone has a way to vote—even when a public health emergency suddenly forces many people who might otherwise vote in person to cast their ballot by mail instead.
For more than 40 years, PIRG’s consumer watchdogs have identified threats in the marketplace and advocated for stronger consumer protections. Here’s some of the work we did in 2020 to stand up for Maryland consumers:

Landmark health care law protects patients from surprise medical billing  
DEC. 27, 2021: Maybe this has happened to you: After a visit to the hospital or emergency room, you get stuck with an unexpected bill for hundreds or even thousands of dollars from an out-of-network provider.

It’s called surprise medical billing, and a bipartisan bill to stop the practice was signed into law on Dec. 27, 2020, as part of a coronavirus relief package. The No Surprises Act will protect patients from “balance-billing,” a practice where out-of-network providers charge the difference between their fees and the maximum allowed by patients’ insurance.

“This undoubtedly is the most far-reaching consumer health protection that Congress has passed in years,” said Patricia Kelmar, our national network’s health care campaigns director.

“While the final law is not exactly the legislation we called for, we’ll work hard to ensure strong regulations are put in place and consumers know their rights.”

Report finds PPE shortages at 1 in 5 nursing homes this summer  
OCT. 27, 2020: Protecting our most vulnerable citizens and preventing further COVID-19 outbreaks means making sure our nursing homes have the masks, gowns and hand sanitizer they need to limit the spread of the coronavirus.

But the nation’s nursing homes experienced massive shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE) over the summer of 2020, a U.S. PIRG Education Fund and Frontier Group analysis of data collected by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services found.

The Oct. 27 report, covered by the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times and CBS News, found that, in August, a fifth of reporting facilities possessed less than a one-week supply of one or more types of PPE—a critical shortage by industry standards.

“It’s appalling that this is how we treat our most vulnerable—our senior citizens and people recovering from a major surgery or illness,” said U.S. PIRG Education Fund Consumer Watchdog Teresa Murray.

U.S. PIRG Education Fund recommended in its report that Congress address PPE shortages by passing the Medical Supply Transparency and Delivery Act. ■

Photo credits: (above, left to right) Spectrum News 1, Studio Romantic via Shutterstock
In 2020, Maryland PIRG celebrated when our state’s landmark ban on single-use plastic foam food containers took effect. Meanwhile, we also launched a campaign urging Whole Foods to eliminate unnecessary single-use plastic packaging from its stores.

**Polystyrene ban goes into effect in Maryland**

**OCT. 9, 2020:** Maryland has fulfilled its 2019 promise of becoming the first state in the country to ban plastic foam.

On Oct. 1, a state law went into effect prohibiting restaurants, schools and other food service businesses from using polystyrene foam containers. The law was originally passed—with strong support from Maryland PIRG—in March 2019, but over the summer of 2020 its implementation was delayed by the Maryland Department for the Environment, citing COVID-19 as the cause. But advocates spoke out on the lack of transparency regarding the delay and the continued urgency of addressing our country’s plastic waste crisis.

“Whether they end up as litter in our neighborhoods or waterways, buried in a leaky landfill, or burned up in a toxic incinerator, each coffee cup and clamshell container we use pollutes our communities for hundreds of years,” said Maryland PIRG State Director Emily Scarr. “In the 21st century, we should be able to keep our coffee hot without causing permanent harm to our communities’ health and well-being.”

**Maryland PIRG urges Whole Foods to do its part to cut plastic pollution**

**NOV. 30, 2020:** Whole Foods isn’t living up to its planet-before-profit reputation—but lightening its plastic footprint could change that and help address our plastic waste problem.

In November 2020, Maryland PIRG launched a campaign calling for a commitment from Whole Foods to phase out single-use plastic packaging at its stores. Earlier in the year, environmental group As You Sow gave the grocery chain an “F” for its policies on plastic packaging, material that contributes to the massive amounts of plastic waste overrunning our landfills, littering our communities and polluting our planet.

“As a company with a reputation for selling food that is good for people and the planet, Whole Foods can make a big dent in reducing plastic pollution,” said Alex Truelove, Zero Waste campaign director with our national network.

“Whole Foods Market once led the industry as the first U.S. grocer to eliminate plastic grocery bags at checkout in 2008. It’s time they lead again.”

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Emily Scarr spoke about what Maryland’s foam food container ban—some 19 months in the making—will mean for our vision for a zero-waste future.

Maryland PIRG launched a campaign urging Whole Foods to eliminate unnecessary plastic packaging from its stores in November 2020.
Right to Repair: not taking ‘broken’ for an answer

Our Right to Repair campaign took on new dimensions in response to the coronavirus pandemic, as medical repair professionals faced repair restrictions in the midst of a public health crisis. In addition, our network’s work to empower consumers and third-party repair professionals with the right to repair was recognized by business magazine Fast Company.

Maryland PIRG helps win release of vital service information for ventilators

APRIL 22, 2020: In March 2020, as cases of COVID-19 mounted, it became vitally important that hospitals be able to keep ventilators in service as much as possible. But some manufacturers had restricted access to the repair documentation and service keys that biomedical repair technicians need to fix and maintain these lifesaving devices, prompting action from Maryland PIRG and our national network.

More than 43,000 petition signers and state treasurers and auditors from nine states joined our network’s call for manufacturers to help hospitals confront the pandemic by releasing ventilator service information. And in April, manufacturers including GE, Medtronic and Fisher & Paykel started to make that requested service information available.

“I want to thank ventilator manufacturers for providing access to service documents,” said Nathan Proctor, our national network’s Right to Repair campaign director. “We hope this also serves as an example of how restricting repair is harmful. When technicians can’t access service manuals, it creates unnecessary barriers to fixing lifesaving equipment.”

Right to Repair named a finalist for Fast Company’s ‘World Changing ideas’

APRIL 28, 2020: Right to Repair is a simple concept: If you own something, you should be allowed to fix it. Too often, though, we are blocked from repairing our devices for proprietary reasons, leading to unnecessary costs and electronic waste.

In April, business magazine Fast Company selected our national network’s Right to Repair campaign as a finalist for its World Changing Ideas awards in the Politics & Policy category.

“We appreciate Fast Company’s recognition of the importance of the right to repair,” said Nathan Proctor. “It seems like such a simple premise, but it’s clear that we need to fight for it.”

In 2020, Right to Repair legislation was introduced or carried over in 20 state legislatures.
Member Spotlight

Our work is made possible by the support of you, our members. This year we’re highlighting the story of one of our national network’s members, in her own words.

Clare Feinson

As a child, I was often involved in causes I cared about. I collected money for UNICEF at Halloween and I was always up for service projects through the Girl Scouts. My parents were active in political and volunteer organizations and involved me in mailing newsletters, organizing events, leafleting and getting petitions signed.

My involvement with PIRG started when I was a graduate student at George Washington University, where I served as the chair of D.C. PIRG for a year. I think your organization has done a great job selecting issues where the public interest needs an advocate. Though I have not been involved in the day-to-day workings of PIRG for a long time, I continue to support the work that you do.