Maryland PIRG

2018 PROGRAM REPORT
Finding common ground and making real progress

Dear Maryland PIRG Member,

Given the partisan rancor in our nation, one might reasonably wonder if it’s still possible for Americans to find common ground and solve problems.

It is. And we have examples:

1. Consumers, patients, doctors and nurses from across the country came together to stop the food industry’s overuse of antibiotics, a practice that leads to antibiotic-resistant bacteria—or “superbugs”—that cut short tens of thousands of lives each year. This wasn’t about red America or blue America, it was all Americans sharing a common interest that convinced McDonald’s to commit to reducing antibiotics in its beef supply chain. (See page 3 for more.)

2. Maryland PIRG and our partners worked hard to make the case for forward-thinking transportation policy as candidates debated the state’s infrastructure needs during election season. After years of advocacy and organizing, we’re starting to see a shift in the state’s spending priorities—away from wasteful highway expansions and towards better public transportation, walking and biking options, and maintenance of existing infrastructure. (See page 5.)

3. A bipartisan majority in the last Congress approved a law allowing consumers to freeze their personal credit reports for free—the simplest and most effective step we can take to prevent identity theft. (See page 7 for how our Consumer Watchdog team made it easier for consumers to protect ourselves.)

Many threats to our health and safety cut across political divides. When we get beyond the filter bubbles that inhibit real dialogue in Washington, D.C., and on social media, we can find support for solutions to these problems and others like them.

Your support for Maryland PIRG is helping to bring people together and find answers for a healthier, cleaner, safer and more secure future for all Americans. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Emily Scarr
State Director, Maryland PIRG

Photo credits: (cover, clockwise from top) Staff, Staff, Ricky Osborne, CBS News; (above) Kimball Nelson.
Making our democracy more democratic

Maryland leads efforts to reform our democracy
Maryland PIRG believes that everyone should have an equal opportunity to influence our elections, and political candidates should raise money from the people they are seeking to represent, with contributions limited to what the average voter can afford.

In Maryland, counties and cities are beginning to move toward a new way to fund elections, where candidates who voluntarily abide by these guidelines can compete with those accepting big checks from wealthy interests.

In 2018, Prince George’s County approved a bill establishing small donor public financing, and Baltimore voters approved a proposition to create the Fair Elections Fund to curb the influence of big money in politics.

Small-donor public financing limits the influence of wealthy and corporate donors while encouraging more diverse candidates to run for office. The idea works. Montgomery County used its new small donor program for the first time in 2018 to great results.

According to Maryland PIRG Foundation’s research, candidates in the matching program raised 58 percent more money from small donors. Even better, candidates receiving matching funds raised 94 percent of their campaign funding from small donations.

Automatic voter registration—it’s the law
In April 2018, Marylanders celebrated the Maryland General Assembly’s passage of the Secure and Accessible Registration Act, a bipartisan bill to implement automatic voter registration. And in November, voters approved a constitutional amendment to enable Election Day registration.

Under these new policies, eligible voters will be registered at state agencies unless they opt out, modernizing our democratic system while making it more accessible, cost-efficient and secure. Election Day registration will ensure that more eligible voters are able to participate in elections.

Maryland PIRG and the Everyone Votes Maryland coalition worked for years to pass these important reforms, building bipartisan support and rallying the public to call on our elected leaders to join states across the country in implementing these crucial voting modernization measures. With support from both sides of the aisle, we’ve helped Maryland become a national leader in bringing our democratic system into the 21st century.
Stopping the misuse of life-saving antibiotics

Because of your support this past year, Maryland PIRG and our national network were able to help reduce the overuse of antibiotics on factory farms.

The overuse and misuse of antibiotics in humans, animals and agriculture is creating “superbugs” that are resistant to treatment. The World Health Organization has named antibiotic resistance one of the top 10 global threats to human health. According to an estimate from researchers at Washington University School of Medicine, as many as 162,000 people die from multidrug-resistant infections annually in the U.S., making these infections the third leading cause of death.

Maryland PIRG and our national network have gathered support from activists, corporate actors and health professionals across the country to address the looming dangers of antibiotic resistance. A group of physicians and health experts, The Health Professional Action Network, is ready to be our voice in the media, in state capitols, and wherever we need to counter misleading claims or advocate for new solutions.

In honor of World Antibiotics Awareness Week in November, our national network partner, U.S. PIRG Education Fund, featured seven infectious disease physicians, specialists, scholars and pediatricians from our Health Professionals Action Network in an eight-part video series. These champions of medicine joined staff to discuss antibiotic resistance and the need to reduce antibiotic use in human and veterinary medicine.
On Nov. 15, U.S. PIRG Education Fund joined a group of panelists at Harvard University to discuss the future of antibiotics. Speakers presented solutions such as stopping the routine use of antibiotics on factory farms, investing more time and money into developing new antibiotics, and implementing legislation that curbs the overuse of antibiotics.

**Setting off a chain reaction**

In October, Maryland PIRG released our national network’s “Chain Reaction IV” report grading the top 25 U.S. burger chains on their antibiotics policies. Most, including McDonald’s, received failing grades. BurgerFi and Shake Shack were the only two chains to earn “A” grades for sourcing beef raised without routine antibiotics. The routine use of antibiotics in livestock significantly contributes to the spread of antibiotic resistance.

In fact, nearly two-thirds of the medically important antibiotics sold in the U.S. are intended for use in livestock and poultry operations. Fast food restaurants, as one of the largest markets for meat in the U.S., can play an instrumental role in pushing producers to use antibiotics responsibly if they commit to only purchasing beef raised without routine antibiotics.

Throughout 2018, Maryland PIRG and our national network called on McDonald’s to use its influence to take action that could spark an industry-wide shift toward curbing the overuse of antibiotics in the meat industry. Today, we’re pleased to inform you that McDonald’s made a commitment to do just that. The company committed to monitor and set reduction targets for antibiotic use in its global beef supply chain by the end of 2020.

**Enforcing Maryland’s Keep Antibiotics Effective Act**

Maryland’s Keep Antibiotics Effective Act of 2017 ended the routine use of antibiotics on animals that are not sick and passed with strong bipartisan support. Unfortunately, in the summer of 2018 the Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA) proposed regulations that undermine the intent of the law.

Maryland PIRG led a coalition of public health, labor, business and environmental groups to push back on the weak regulations, submitting more than 1,000 public comments requesting improvements.

Now, state legislators are working to ensure the MDA implements the law by passing the Keep Antibiotics Effective Act of 2019. If passed, the law would also require reporting on the use of medically important antibiotics on farms. Maryland can position itself as a national leader on the fight to save these life-saving drugs.
Advocating for 21st-century transportation solutions

Fix it first, then build for the future
Even though demand for alternative transportation options is gaining ground, our state leaders continue to pour our tax dollars into new highway expansion projects.

In 2018, nine highway projects across the country—slated to cost $30 billion—exemplified the need for a fresh approach to transportation planning and spending, according to the fourth annual “Highway Boondoggles” report by our research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund.

Maryland’s $9 billion “Traffic Relief Plan” is one of the country’s biggest and most expensive highway expansion projects. It’s intended to bring relief after the closure of the Baltimore Metro, but expanding Maryland’s already substantial highway capacity would likely do little for commuters. With this limited relief comes astronomical costs—for neighborhoods along the route, for Maryland taxpayers, and for Maryland’s transportation future.

“The money we spend today decides how we get around tomorrow,” said Matt Casale, our national transportation campaign director. “We need to avoid the type of highway projects that should be in our rearview mirror.”

Maryland PIRG is calling on state legislators to adopt a fix-it-first approach to transportation planning, to stop highway boondoggles, and to invest in the future of transportation.

Northeastern and mid-Atlantic states are banding together to tackle transportation pollution
On Dec. 18, Maryland joined Massachusetts, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia and Washington, D.C., to announce that they will create a regional plan to curb transportation pollution.

“Americans want a modern transportation system that is cleaner, healthier and more efficient,” said Matt Casale. “We are one step closer to getting the 21st-century transportation system we need and deserve.”

The devil will be in the details, which we expect to see within the next year. The states are all part of a broader coalition called the Transportation and Climate Initiative that will develop a region-wide policy to reduce transportation emissions and transition to a low-carbon transportation system. We’re urging the initiative to support better public transit, more bike-friendly and pedestrian-friendly streets, and a transition to electric cars, trucks and buses.
Protecting consumers from dangerous products

In 2018, Maryland PIRG Foundation and our national Consumer Watchdog team conducted independent testing and research to identify dangers that can pose risks to our health, safety or well-being; and worked hard to get dangerous products off of store shelves.

In 2018, Maryland PIRG released a series of reports by our research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund. March’s “In Your Face” report found asbestos in three different shimmery makeup products sold at Claire’s, with one containing more than 150,000 fibers of asbestos per gram of product. Asbestos is an extremely dangerous substance that can increase the risk of skin cancer and cause lung cancer, mesothelioma and even death.

Our network quickly alerted Claire’s to these test results, and asked the company to recall the items and inform customers immediately, but representatives refused. Maryland PIRG is now calling on Congress to pass legislation that will protect our kids by requiring appropriate testing and labeling of cosmetics.

Maryland PIRG also released our national network’s “Trouble in Toyland” report in November, identifying unsafe toys that skirted safety regulations and made it onto store shelves and internet marketplaces. Our national network and health professionals across the country held news events to alert parents and others of the dangers some toys pose to children.
Protecting consumers from data security threats

From warning of data breaches to preventing credit fraud to protecting consumers from identity theft, Maryland PIRG and our national network are here to help you keep your data safe and secure.

More than one year after announcing the biggest data breach in history, Equifax still hasn’t been held accountable or provided the information and tools consumers need to adequately protect themselves. The breach exposed 148 million consumers’ social security numbers and birthdates, and for some people, credit card numbers and driver’s license numbers, putting them at increased risk of identity theft. That’s why our network stepped in.

On Sept. 7—the anniversary of the public announcement of the Equifax data breach—Maryland PIRG released our national network’s report detailing the government’s failure to hold the company accountable and offering tips for consumers to protect themselves. The report also concludes that both oversight and financial consequences are needed to prevent future large-scale breaches.

“We’ve put together tips for preventing, detecting and resolving different types of identity theft and fraud, all in one place,” said Mike Litt, member of U.S. PIRG Education Fund’s national Consumer Watchdog team.
A major victory for data security
The best way to protect yourself against the Equifax breach and similar data security threats got a little easier in 2018. Maryland PIRG and our national network helped pass a bipartisan law requiring credit bureaus to offer free credit freezes—a vital protection against identity theft.

We recommend that everyone freeze their credit with all three major credit bureaus, Equifax, Experian and TransUnion. You should check your credit card statements regularly for fraudulent charges and set up an online Social Security account.

“It’s about time the credit bureaus stopped charging us for the right to control our own information. We didn’t give them permission to collect or sell our information in the first place,” said Mike Litt, member of our national Consumer Watchdog team.

If you freeze your credit, the credit reporting bureaus can’t share your information with new lenders unless you first thaw the freeze—making it more difficult for criminals to open a fraudulent account in your name.
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