Ramping up COVID-19 testing is the key to making us safer

Matt Wellington, director of our national network’s public health campaigns

As we braced for the winter—and for a new set of challenges in keeping ourselves and our loved ones safe from COVID-19—the coronavirus spread uncontrolled across much of the country, killing hundreds of Americans every day.

Our national network called on leaders to reduce caseloads by making the painful choice to shut down where and when the virus was spreading out of control. But to keep the virus contained, and to ensure safe reopening, we also needed dramatically more testing.

Maryland and most other states were not hitting the COVID-19 testing targets needed to “suppress” the virus—to catch isolated cases before they turn into outbreaks.

But, instead of centrally coordinating a ramp-up of testing for all states, the federal government mostly continued to leave states in the lurch.

In response, Maryland PIRG and our national network launched our Test More, Save Lives campaign, calling on governors across the country to commit to hitting the testing benchmarks required to protect public health.

What level of testing do we need in order to suppress COVID-19?

The Brown University School of Public Health and Harvard Global Health Institute have built a model that projects how much testing each state needs to effectively suppress the virus. Our national network is calling on governors to commit to meeting and maintaining testing targets for their states based on this model.
Ensuring that each of us can access necessary testing infrastructure requires states to:

- Expand testing locations to include a variety of options such as drive-thru and walk-up sites, as well as mobile testing units that visit at-risk settings such as churches and urban neighborhoods.
- Make sure anyone who needs a test gets one, regardless of whether they have symptoms.
- Ensure all test results come back within 48 hours.
- Launch educational campaigns to inform people of where they can get tested and how.
- Target testing efforts at high-risk settings such as nursing homes, meat-packing factories, schools and prisons.
- Increase purchasing power by forming consortia, similar to the one started by Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan and the National Governors Association.

More testing will help us save lives

As we acknowledge the tragedy of hundreds of thousands of American deaths, we reflect on our response to the pandemic and on how many of these deaths could have been avoided had we responded as quickly and as effectively as other similarly wealthy countries.

But we can’t let the mistakes of the past dictate how we respond to this crisis today. It’s as important as ever that we all keep social distancing, wearing masks, and limiting gatherings and non-essential travel. But adding more testing to the equation is a key to getting this virus under control and preventing widespread community outbreaks—and that’s why it’s imperative that Gov. Larry Hogan increase testing.

How can we expand testing in my state?

To contain the spread of the coronavirus, states must hit their testing benchmarks. The few states that met their targets, such as New York, used tried-and-tested strategies that other states can replicate.

New York residents can get a test with or without symptoms. You don’t need a test order from a healthcare provider, and there are several testing sites across the state. Rather than just using testing as a tool to contain big outbreaks after they happen, New York’s infrastructure—combined with clear communication of public health protocols from local and state leaders—allows it to prevent isolated infections from spreading.

Maryland PIRG backs bill in Congress to loosen medical repair restrictions

Not being able to fix a critical medical device creates a risk for patients, especially during a pandemic. Too often, though, manufacturer restrictions impede repairs.

Maryland PIRG is calling on Congress to pass a bill introduced by U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden (Ore.) and Rep. Yvette Clark (N.Y.), which seeks to lower restrictions on components and service information that biomedical repair technicians (biomeds) need to fix essential medical devices during the COVID-19 crisis.

“I’ve talked to more than a hundred biomeds since the start of the crisis,” said Kevin O’Reilly, Right to Repair associate with our national network. “All they want is to be able to fix broken equipment and protect the patients in their hospitals.”

In a survey of 222 repair professionals released by our national research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund in July, 30 percent reported having critical equipment—such as defibrillators, ventilators and anesthesia machines—that they
could not put to use because they lacked access to parts and service information.

DEMOCRACY

In the November elections, students made their voices heard

Our democracy works best when we all participate.

This fall, to help get out the vote for the November elections, Maryland PIRG, Maryland PIRG Students and Maryland PIRG Foundation hosted the nonpartisan statewide Student Vote Summit. We also participated in nonpartisan voter education webinars with the Everyone Votes Maryland coalition, and worked with the State Board of Elections to ensure Marylanders would be able to vote safely during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Voting is a building block for civic engagement and a more representative and responsive government. But too many people, especially young people, don’t participate in elections. In order to increase youth voter participation, our staff and student volunteers had 10,000 remote conversations with young voters this fall and reached tens of thousands more online.

“We are America’s largest and most diverse generation,” explained Greeshma Anand, Board Chair of Maryland PIRG Students. “By showing up and voting, young people can make big things happen.”

BEYOND PLASTIC

Polystyrene ban goes into effect in Maryland

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 this summer 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.”
Some food packaging at popular restaurant chains—including McDonald’s Big Mac container—may contain toxic PFAS chemicals, found a report co-released by Maryland PIRG Foundation, the Mind the Store campaign, Toxic-Free Future and other coalition partners.

Nicknamed “forever chemicals” for their persistence in the human body and environment, PFAS (or per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances) have been linked to health problems including cancer, liver damage and decreased fertility. Paper bags used for greasy foods and molded fiber bowls and trays were among the items that most frequently tested above the fluorine screening level suggesting they were treated with PFAS.

Maryland PIRG is supporting the Maryland PFAS Protection Act to stop the use of PFAS in food packaging, carpets and firefighting foam, as well as restrict the mass disposal of these chemicals to protect our air and drinking water from contamination.

“Is it really worth risking our health so our hands don’t get greasy?” asks Danielle Melgar, toxics advocate with Maryland PIRG Foundation.

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Dear Maryland PIRG member,

If the past year has taught us anything, it’s that our problems don’t come one at a time. Thanks to your support, we’re working to ramp up COVID-19 testing, cut down plastic waste, and get toxic chemicals out of our everyday lives. Thank you for making it all possible.

Thank you,

Emily Scarr
State Director
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