Maryland PIRG builds momentum toward zero waste

By Alex Truelove, Zero Waste campaign director with our national network

The United States has a waste problem. We make too much, reuse too little and replace our things with new ones too quickly—practices that have led to massive amounts of wasted material headed to landfills and polluting our environment.

With your support, Maryland PIRG and our national network are campaigning for policies to tackle our waste problem. Here’s just some of the work you’ve helped make possible:

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

Whole Foods isn’t living up to its planet-before-profit reputation—but bold action to cut 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.

In June of last 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.”
More than 130 organizations joined our national research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund in sending a letter in March urging Whole Foods CEO John Mackey to commit to steps for reducing the company’s plastic waste.

25 states, including Maryland, pursue policies to secure consumers’ right to repair

Policies that reduce waste, increase consumer choice and save families money should be no-brainers—and, fortunately, more states are beginning to see it that way.

Thanks in large part to the advocacy of our national network and coalition partners, 2021 is shaping up to be a big year for state legislation to guarantee consumers the right to fix their stuff. As the year began, 25 states—including Maryland—introduced bills that would lower manufacturer restrictions on service information, tools, parts and diagnostic software that consumers and independent repair shops need to make repairs.

The movement’s new momentum has major implications for our country’s waste crisis. Americans get rid of 416,000 cell phones per day, and only 15 to 20 percent of electronic waste is recycled. That could change if consumers were more empowered to extend the lives of their broken devices by taking them to the repair shop of their choice.

“We imagine a different kind of system, where instead of throwing things out, we reuse, salvage and rebuild,” said Maryland PIRG State Director Emily Scarr. “We know it works—now it’s time to win the right to repair for all electronic products.”

Waste Is Out Of Fashion campaign takes on clothing waste

Globally, the equivalent of one dump truck filled with clothing and other textiles is sent to a landfill or incinerator every second.

That’s why Maryland PIRG launched Waste Is Out Of Fashion in January 2021, a new campaign to reduce clothing waste—starting with banning an industry practice called “overstock destruction” that’s perpetuating the problem. Clothing companies commonly destroy, incinerate or landfill unsold and unused clothing—their overstock—to make way for new merchandise.

“Clothing manufacturers and retailers should not be overproducing clothing just to throw it out,” said our national network’s Zero Waste campaign associate, Olivia Sullivan. “That’s why we need state governments to take action.”

Maryland PIRG is calling on Gov. Larry Hogan to cut down clothing waste by banning the destruction of overstock in our state.

LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

Public interest bills on the move in Annapolis

In its 2021 legislative session, the Maryland General Assembly took steps to improve our democracy and create and protect public health.

Lawmakers advanced Maryland PIRG-backed bills to increase civic participation for student and military voters, improve mail-in voting, and increase access to early voting. State lawmakers also updated and permanently funded the small donor public financing program for candidates for governor, which will help limit large and corporate donations and bring power back to the people for the 2022 election and beyond.

Legislators also passed bills to strengthen protections for lead in school drinking water, electrify state vehicles and reduce organic waste.
GOV. LARRY HOGAN MUST NOW DECIDE WHICH OF THESE BILLS WILL BECOME LAW. MARYLAND PIRG’S ADVOCACY AND ORGANIZING HAVE HELPED MAKE THIS PROGRESS POSSIBLE, AND WE’LL KEEP AT IT AS THESE BILLS APPROACH THE FINISH LINE.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

**Nursing homes struggle through widespread staffing shortages amid the pandemic**

Saving as many lives as possible during the coronavirus pandemic means prioritizing the health and safety of the nation’s most vulnerable populations.

But nursing homes around the country suffered from staffing shortages in 2020 as fatigue, COVID infections, PPE shortages and lack of child care impacted workers, according to January analysis from our national research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund.

As the number of understaffed nursing homes increased from May to December 2020, more than 200,000 Americans resided in homes that reported shortages of nurses, aides or clinical staff at any given point through most of last year. By early December, the percentage of nursing homes reporting a shortage had reached 23 percent.

“This is a circular nightmare,” said Teresa Murray, U.S. PIRG Education Fund Consumer Watchdog. “Staff shortages existed before the pandemic and they just got worse as COVID-19 spread.”

U.S. PIRG Education Fund advised rapid approval of emergency funding for nursing homes and the prioritization of long-term care staff and residents for vaccination.

TRANSFORM TRANSPORTATION

**Utility investments in electric school buses can help protect our kids and climate**

How can utility companies help protect our kids’ health as well as our climate? The answer is surprisingly simple: by investing in clean, electric school buses instead of dirty diesel ones.

Our national research partner U.S. PIRG Education Fund released a joint report with Environment America Research & Policy Center on Feb. 2 detailing steps utilities across the country can take to assist school districts in paying for zero-emission buses—an investment that can have huge long-term benefits for both schools and the utilities themselves.

Currently, most school buses in the U.S. run on diesel, a fossil fuel whose exhaust is linked to asthma, bronchitis and cancer and contributes to global warming.

“Getting to school shouldn’t include a daily dose of toxic air pollution,” said Ethan Evans, Electric Buses for America campaign associate with our national network. “With school districts, lawmakers and utilities all working together, we can make the switch to all-electric school buses and give our kids a healthier ride to school.”

U.S. PIRG Education Fund’s Teresa Murray raised the alarm on nursing home staff shortages in an interview with Scripps National News, aired on The Denver Channel.

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For more information call 1-800-841-7299 or send an email to: plannedgiving@marylandpirg.org
This past winter, as the effort to vaccinate Americans against COVID-19 gained momentum, misinformation and confusion threatened to limit the effort’s reach.

Our national partners at U.S. PIRG co-hosted a Facebook Live panel with Doctors for America on Jan. 19 to discuss how health providers, policymakers and the media can communicate accurate vaccine information to the public. The panel included Drs. Saad B. Omer, Rob Davidson and Christine Grady, as well as infectious disease and global health journalist Helen Branswell.

Topics included communicating vaccine benefits to rural communities; the extensive testing and review that approved vaccines have undergone; and more.

“As vaccination ramped up at the beginning of the year, vaccine hesitancy posed an obstacle to protecting the country against COVID-19,” said U.S. PIRG Public Health Campaigns Director Matt Wellington, who moderated the panel.

“Vaccinating the country is a challenge, but we know that we can accomplish this feat by following the advice of medical experts,” said U.S. PIRG Public Health Campaigns Director Matt Wellington, who moderated the panel.