Responding to the COVID-19 crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced Americans to confront harsh realities—from concern for the health and safety of themselves and their families, to the financial struggles brought on by mass layoffs and a dampened economy.

In response to the crisis, Maryland PIRG and U.S. PIRG Education Fund, the research and policy arm of our national network, have continued to work—from a safe social distance—for a healthier, safer world, calling for measures to improve our country’s ability to discover and care for COVID-19 cases, to protect consumers from price gouging in the marketplace, and to increase production and distribution of vital medical supplies as rapidly as possible.

Ramping up our testing capacity

When the novel coronavirus made landfall in the United States, health experts warned that there were not enough COVID-19 tests available for all who would need them. The inability to adequately test for the virus left health professionals and lawmakers with an incomplete picture as to the scope of the problem.

Maryland PIRG, U.S. PIRG Education Fund and our national network called on Adm. Brett Giroir, the head of the government’s coronavirus testing response, to implement a national plan for scaling up our testing capacity as quickly as possible.

Maryland PIRG and U.S. PIRG Education Fund supported plans crafted by public health experts—including former Food and Drug Administration Commissioners David Kessler, M.D. and Scott Gottlieb, M.D.—for federal leadership to build this testing capacity. The plans included expanding labs and speeding up testing time, national coordination on large-scale purchasing...
of testing supplies, and building systems to collect data and identify cases as fast as possible to prevent further spread of the virus.

**Preventing price gouging in a pandemic**

As people rushed to buy hand sanitizer and other critical supplies early on in the outbreak, U.S. PIRG Education Fund released groundbreaking research that revealed massive price gouging on Amazon. The report found that, in February, most surveyed hand sanitizers and face masks saw price surges of more than 50 percent above their 90-day averages. Even 1 in 6 products sold directly by Amazon—not third-party vendors—saw similar spikes.

More than 375,000 people have since joined Maryland PIRG and our national network in calling on Amazon and other major online marketplaces to implement safeguards that prevent prices from significantly increasing during states of emergency.

Even top officials and lawmakers have joined us in taking action to ensure consumers aren’t taken advantage of during this time of crisis. In letters organized by U.S. PIRG Education Fund, attorneys general from 33 states called on Amazon, Walmart, eBay, Facebook and Craigslist to proactively put a stop to price gouging on their platforms. In April, 346 state legislators from 45 states signed a similar letter sent by U.S. PIRG Education Fund to those same companies.

**Confronting our medical supply shortage**

In response to ventilator supply shortages, Maryland PIRG and our national network have called on President Trump to fully utilize the Defense Production Act (DPA) and to coordinate distribution of critical medical supplies directly to affected areas. Thousands have signed our network’s petition calling on the president to use the DPA to double the amount of ventilators by mobilizing manufacturers in wartime-scale production efforts. On March 27, the president ordered General Motors to begin producing these lifesaving machines, but more needs to be done to fully meet demand.

Across the country, hospitals have struggled to get the supplies they need to protect frontline workers and care for COVID-19 patients. Our national network recruited 116 mayors and county executives to sign onto a letter urging the Trump administration to centrally coordinate procurement and distribution of essential supplies to everyone who needs them.

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended our way of life. As we confront these challenges, Maryland PIRG and U.S. PIRG Education Fund are committed to championing the policies that will best protect Americans’ health, safety and well-being in this time of crisis.

**ZERO OUT TOXICS**

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

Maryland continues to be a national leader in protecting its citizens 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 interest 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 firefighter 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 and Gov. Hogan for allowing it to become law.”

**FOOD SAFETY**

**How safe is our food? Produce recalls are down, but meat and poultry are sky-high**


While safety recalls for produce and processed food from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration have declined 34 percent since 2016—when new safety standards were implemented—recalls for meat and poultry have rocketed up 65 percent since 2013, finds the “How Safe is Our Food?” report.

Upticks in recalls don’t necessarily mean our food has gotten less safe. In fact, they could mean our food safety systems have gotten better at identifying dangerous foods. But, says PIRG Consumer Watchdog Grace Brombach, that point is moot: Contaminations should be caught before recalls become necessary.

“Americans should be confident that their food is safe and not contaminated by dangerous bacteria like E. coli and salmonella,” said Grace.

U.S. PIRG Education Fund is advocating for improvements in our food safety systems—including increased testing, monitoring and traceability for pathogens.

**DEMOCRACY FOR THE PEOPLE**

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

Thanks in large part to Maryland PIRG and our allies, our state’s June elections were safer and more accessible.

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

The Board planned to recommend elections be exclusively vote-by-mail. And while Maryland PIRG and partners support the move to mail-in voting, we advocated for limited in-person voting, with strict health and safety protocols, for people unable to vote by mail and those needing to register to vote. Ultimately, the Board and Gov. Hogan decided to enable limited in-person voting.

“Democracy is an essential service,” said Maryland PIRG State Director Emily Scarr. “During this crisis, we must protect our democracy and build faith in government. Everyone should have the chance to vote, and do so safely.”
Dear Maryland PIRG member,

From a safe social distance, we’re continuing our work for a healthier, safer world. From responding to the COVID-19 crisis, to improving our food safety systems, to banning toxic weed killers and harmful single-use plastics—your support is what makes it all possible.

Thank you,

Addressing our plastic pollution problem means stemming the flow of plastic into our communities, landfills and environment.

On Feb. 11, U.S. Sen. Tom Udall and U.S. Rep. Alan Lowenthal introduced legislation that would re-envision how we handle our plastic waste. The first measure outlined in the proposed Break Free From Plastic Act is simple: make less of it. The legislation would phase out unnecessary single-use plastics, which overburden our landfills and pollute our environment. The legislation also provides funding for recycling and composting infrastructure, and would shift the financial burden of managing waste and recyclables from town and city governments to manufacturers.

“We’re inundated by plastic pollution, but we make more each year,” said Alex Truelove, our national network’s Beyond Plastic campaign director. “Finally, we have a federal bill that offers real solutions, drawing from successful ordinances across the globe.”

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Maryland PIRG
CITIZEN AGENDA • VOLUME 33, NO. 2

BEYOND PLASTIC

New federal bill calls for U.S. to move beyond plastic


Thx Mary PIRG

Dear Maryland PIRG member,

From a safe social distance, we’re continuing our work for a healthier, safer world. From responding to the COVID-19 crisis, to improving our food safety systems, to banning toxic weed killers and harmful single-use plastics—your support is what makes it all possible.

Thank you,

Emily Scarr
State Director
info@marylandpirg.org

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