Finding common ground and making real progress

Dear MASSPIRG member,

Sometimes people ask if it’s frustrating to be involved in political advocacy right now.

Sure, we’ve seen the divisions in our country deepen in recent years, and we’ve watched them harden in Washington, D.C., in ways that make positive action on issues that affect Americans’ lives nearly impossible. That’s frustrating.

But from the beginning, the approach of MASSPIRG and our partner groups across the country has been to make progress wherever we can, whenever we can, as best we can—even when things are gridlocked in D.C. That’s as true today as it was in 1971, when PIRG began.

Over the last few years, our national network has focused our energy at the state and local levels, winning changes that are documented in these pages.

For example, our Ban Roundup campaign continued to call for bans on glyphosate-based weed killers, such as Monsanto’s Roundup, unless or until they are proven safe. In 2019, even more cities across the U.S. added their names to the list of municipalities that have banned or restricted glyphosate-based herbicides.

As we work to improve air quality and cut down on climate emissions, our Transform Transportation campaign is winning support for public transit, electric buses, electric cars and other clean, healthy alternatives to wasting billions on new or expanded highways.

To empower consumers and reduce waste, our Right to Repair campaign called on companies to remove barriers that prevent us from repairing their products. Our advocates and coalition partners put model legislation to guarantee our right to repair in front of 20 state legislatures.

Our leaders in Washington should be doing much more on these and other issues. But we don’t have time to brood about their failures. There are too many opportunities elsewhere to make progress for our health, our safety and the quality of our lives.

Thanks to you, our staff and other supporters are seizing every opportunity we can to win positive results for the public.

Janet Domenitz
Executive Director, MASSPIRG

P.S. Our staff quickly shifted to working remotely as the COVID-19 crisis swept the United States. But rest assured, we have continued our work to advocate for you and for a healthier, safer world.
Working to ban Roundup

Since the World Health Organization labeled glyphosate, the main ingredient in Roundup, a probable human carcinogen, we’ve been warning the public and working to ban Roundup unless and until it can be proven safe.

In 2019, two more juries ruled that there was enough evidence to hold Roundup culpable for causing the cancers of three plaintiffs, making that three guilty verdicts since August 2018. More than 42,700 farmers, landscapers, home gardeners and others filed lawsuits claiming Roundup’s makers knew of its cancer risk but failed to warn consumers. And the list of U.S. cities that have banned or restricted glyphosate-based herbicides continues to grow. But Roundup is still putting our health at risk, and more needs to be done.

**Public education, member action strengthen call to ban Roundup**

The more we educate the public about Monsanto’s weed killer Roundup and other glyphosate-based products, the more support we find for banning them—the residue of which can be found practically everywhere.

In July 2019, MASSPIRG and our national network kicked off a summer public education drive in 15 states.

“We’re doing all we can to get the facts to legislators about why we should ban Roundup until and unless it’s proven safe,” said Kara Cook-Schultz, director of our national network’s Ban Roundup campaign. “The support and action of our members are making it easier to get local decision-makers to listen.”

Over the course of the summer, our canvassers enlisted more than 47,000 citizens nationwide to join our call for state leaders to ban Roundup and other glyphosate-based products.

**Studies find weed killer in beer and wine**

The last thing you want to think about when you pour yourself a glass of wine or a cold beer is whether it contains even small amounts of a potentially carcinogenic weed killer.

But the use of glyphosate, the main ingredient in Monsanto’s Roundup, is now so widespread that the chemical is found virtually everywhere—including, as a Feb. 22, 2019, report from our research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund found, in 19 of the 20 beer and wine products tested.

“No matter the efforts of brewers and vintners, [U.S. PIRG Education Fund] found that it is incredibly difficult to avoid ... that consumers will likely drink glyphosate at every happy hour and backyard barbecue around the country,” Kara told USA Today.

MASSPIRG and our national network are calling on federal, state and local officials to ban the use of glyphosate. We’ll drink to that.
For our health, our safety and our children’s future, we need to make our transportation systems cleaner and more efficient. That’s why, in 2019, we launched our Transform Transportation campaign to reduce the need to drive and to electrify buses and cars—because we believe the easiest, cheapest and most pleasant ways to travel should also be the cleanest and healthiest.

**Massachusetts electric school bus pilot provides lessons for the future**

Massachusetts schools are discovering the benefits of electric buses and working out the kinks.

Compared to their diesel counterparts, the three electric buses given to Massachusetts school districts as part of the state’s pilot program emitted significantly lower levels of pollutants linked to asthma and cancer and half the greenhouse gas emissions, finds an Oct. 10, 2019, report authored by MASSPIRG Education Fund. The buses also hit their expected ranges with little trouble in the cold Massachusetts weather.

Of course, every new technology has hiccups. Due to charging costs and early maintenance issues that have since been solved, the buses did not bring expected cost savings—a result which can be prevented with more rigorous planning and collaboration with utilities.

“Getting to school or commuting to work shouldn’t include a daily dose of toxic pollution,” said MASSPIRG Education Fund’s transportation director, Matt Casale. “And why would we continue to use dirty diesel buses ... if they are making the climate crisis worse?”

**We backed a bill that could keep school buses from harming kids’ health.**

On the way to and from school every day, more than 25 million children breathe air polluted by the yellow buses that take them there.

Diesel pollution stunts the growth of kids’ lungs and worsens asthma symptoms, and has also been linked to poorer academic performance. That’s why, on June 6, 2019, seven U.S. senators introduced the Clean School Bus Act, which would commit $1 billion over five years to help school districts transition to all-electric buses.

Our kids shouldn’t have to breathe dirty, dangerous air just to get to school. MASSPIRG and our national network of state PIRGs from across the country applaud and endorse this proposal because it will help protect the health of America’s children.
Ending the nicotine trap

Teen vaping has skyrocketed in recent years, putting an entire generation at risk of nicotine addiction with serious implications for kids’ health. That’s why, in 2019, MASSPIRG and our national network launched our campaign to End the Nicotine Trap.

Massachusetts becomes the first state to ban flavored tobacco amid vaping epidemic

Massachusetts made history on Nov. 27, 2019, as Gov. Charlie Baker signed into law an act prohibiting the sale of flavored tobacco in the commonwealth.

The law, championed by state Sen. John Keenan, state Rep. Danielle Gregoire and Tobacco Free Mass, received overwhelming support in both the House and Senate. The measure grapples with the youth vaping crisis by targeting the flavored products that especially appeal to kids. According to an FDA analysis, 70 percent of teens who vape say they do so because of the flavors.

The ban includes flavored e-cigarettes, menthol cigarettes and flavored chewing tobacco—all products that contain nicotine, a highly addictive substance that can impact learning, impair brain development and increase the risk of addiction to other substances.

“Gov. Baker signing the bill into law today solidifies Massachusetts as a national leader in combating youth tobacco use,” said MASSPIRG Legislative Director Deirdre Cummings, who testified in favor of the law in July 2019.

How the Trump FDA’s plan to curb teen vaping falls short

The good news is that, after Massachusetts took action, the federal government also made moves to reduce vaping among teenagers. The bad news is that there’s a gaping hole in its plan.

On Jan. 2, 2020, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced it would take many flavors of cartridge-based e-cigarettes temporarily off the market due to their appeal to kids. But the Trump administration will leave menthol and non-cartridge-based flavored products on the market.

A 2019 National Youth Tobacco Survey found that mint or menthol ranked as the second most popular flavor category among high school e-cigarette users.

“Leaving menthol-flavored products on the shelves, and not restricting flavors in non-cartridge-based products, limits the effectiveness of any effort to stop the youth e-cigarette epidemic,” said our national network’s End the Nicotine Trap campaign director, Matt Wellington.

Massachusetts’ ban on flavored tobacco products prevents this loophole from being exploited in our state. But in states that don’t have these protections, the FDA’s policy will not fully protect kids from being lured into nicotine addiction by flavored e-cigarettes.
Stopping the overuse of antibiotics

The idea that our antibiotics might no longer work in the near future is alarming. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that at least 35,000 Americans die every year from drug-resistant infections—that’s one person dying every 15 minutes. Other researchers suggest the number of deaths could be nearly five times as many. It’s clear that we need to take urgent action to stop the overuse of antibiotics and keep our life-saving medicines working when we need them.

MASSPIRG and our national network have been hard at work for the last five years to preserve the effectiveness of antibiotics, building a network of leading health professional advocates, and convincing the country’s biggest restaurant chains to stop serving meat raised on the routine use of antibiotics. Here’s some of the ongoing work you’ve helped make possible in 2019.

45,000 tell the EPA: Don’t let growers spray antibiotics on citrus trees

Antibiotic overuse is becoming a global health crisis, threatening to make life-saving medicines ineffective. Yet the Trump administration is moving to allow growers to spray 650,000 pounds annually of these life-saving medicines on citrus trees.

On March 13, 2019, advocates from the research and policy arm of our national network, U.S. PIRG Education Fund, delivered signatures from more than 45,000 people asking the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to deny the proposal.

“The more you use antibiotics, the greater the risk that bacteria resistant to the drugs will flourish and spread. The bottom line is that the potential problems created by spraying massive amounts of strepto-
mycin on citrus fields could outweigh the original problem the EPA wants to solve,” said Matt Wellington, who directs U.S. PIRG Education Fund’s Stop the Overuse of Antibiotics campaign.

Spraying antibiotics on citrus fields is supposed to combat citrus greening, but it won’t cure or prevent the spread of the disease. On top of that, the EPA has clearly not fully considered the consequences of this unprecedented antibiotic use.

We launched a campaign calling on Wendy’s to ‘Hold the Antibiotics’ from its beef supply chain

How can the country’s third-largest burger chain help save the cornerstone of modern medicine? By buying only beef raised without the routine use of antibiotics.

On March 28, 2019, MASSPIRG and our national network launched our campaign to convince Wendy’s to do just that. The CDC now estimates that 35,000 Americans die each year due to antibiotic-resistant infections. Large meat buyers such as Wendy’s can help keep our antibiotics effective by only sourcing beef from livestock farms that don’t overuse our medically important antibiotics.

“We can’t waste life-saving medicines to produce cheap beef. Wendy’s can use its buying power to help move the beef industry away from overusing antibiotics,” said Matt, who directs our national network’s Hold the Antibiotics: Wendy’s campaign.

Wendy’s no longer serves chicken raised on medically important antibiotics. But the chain earned only a D- on the 2019 Chain Reaction scorecard authored by our research partner U.S. PIRG Education Fund, which graded top burger chains on antibiotics use in their beef supply chains.

Superbugs Unplugged: U.S. PIRG launched a podcast about antibiotic resistance

Get ready for some alarming stories—which are all the more alarming because they’re true.

On Nov. 14, 2019, our partner U.S. PIRG and the Antibiotic Resistance Action Center (ARAC) of George Washington University launched “Superbugs Unplugged,” a podcast that will dive into the alarming issue of rising antibiotic resistance. Matt co-hosts the podcast with Dr. Lance Price of ARAC.

“[It’s just] totally baffling to me [that] we treat these drugs, not as the life-saving medicines that they are, but as tools in agriculture and wherever else we’re using them,” said Matt in the podcast’s inaugural episode. “I’m really excited for this podcast ... to be a forum for how we address this problem comprehensively.”

The approach of an era when, because of overuse, our antibiotics might no longer work, and what used to be common, treatable infections may become deadly, is truly terrifying. Our podcast will educate the public and promote solutions to avoid this nightmare scenario.
PIRG Consumer Watchdog on the case

For more than 40 years, our national network has been warning consumers about hidden dangers and helping them to protect themselves. In 2019, our Consumer Watchdog team continued to be on the case: We alerted the public to major food, drug and product recalls, worked to get dangerous products off of store shelves, and more to keep consumers healthy, safe and secure.

How safe is our food? Not safe enough, says PIRG Consumer Watchdog team, and it’s trending in the wrong direction.

Unsafe food recalls in the U.S. are trending the wrong way. From 2013 to 2017, they were up 10 percent overall, and up a whopping 83 percent for the most hazardous meat and poultry recalls.

These were the chief findings in 2019’s “How Safe Is Our Food?” report, written by U.S. PIRG Education Fund—the research and policy arm of our national network—and co-released by MASSPIRG on Jan. 17. The report reached millions of people through coverage on CBS This Morning, NBC News and USA Today.

“We need to be looking for these farm-to-fork preventative solutions that are logical,” PIRG Consumer Watchdog Adam Garber told USA Today. “By doing that, we can protect people’s health.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 1 in 6 people in the U.S. contract foodborne illnesses each year. To stem the problem, our national network’s Consumer Watchdog team is calling for public health standards for agricultural water, a ban on salmonella in meat, and better recalls to get dangerous food out of people’s homes.
PIRG Consumer Watchdog found deadly infant sleepers still in use at day cares

Even PIRG Consumer Watchdog Adam has to stay alert for dangerous products: He discovered recalled inclined sleepers at his infant son’s day care in May 2019.

“They were still using the Fisher-Price Rock ‘n Plays, which were recalled back in April,” he told ABC Action News. Adam immediately alerted the day care to the recall and the Rock ‘n Plays have since been removed. But the incident reveals fundamental flaws in our recall system.

“We do a great job, for the most part, of preventing the sale of devices or products that have been recalled, but we have a long way to go to remove them from people’s homes and child care facilities.”

According to a July 2019 U.S. PIRG Education Fund report that surveyed 376 child care facilities, 1 in 10 indicated they were still using at least one Fisher-Price Rock ‘n Play. Inclined infant sleepers have led to the deaths of more than 73 infants and contradict medical guidance that babies should be placed on flat, hard surfaces with no restraints for sleeping.

U.S. PIRG Education Fund’s work to raise the profile of these dangerous sleepers contributed to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission taking action.

In the wake of the Capital One data breach, Ed Mierzwinski and Adam Garber explain how to protect your credit

Were you affected by the Capital One breach, one of the largest thefts of data from any bank to date?

On July 29, 2019, a massive data theft at Capital One was revealed, including the exposure of social security numbers and other data of more than 100 million people. So what can you do to protect yourself from this and other breaches? As Adam told The Wall Street Journal, “Freeze your credit immediately.”

Ed Mierzwinski, senior director of our national network’s federal consumer program, explained to C-SPAN’s Washington Journal, “Your social security number and your birthday are ... [your] financial DNA. They have a very long shelf life.”

Even if you’ve never had your identity stolen, it only takes one breach for hackers to cause you headaches and potential financial harm. Protecting yourself now can save you from significant financial issues down the road, even if you don’t bank with Capital One.

Remember: “Freeze your credit immediately.”

Right now, the best way to protect yourself from new account identity theft is to freeze your credit at all three credit bureaus. You can find instructions at: https://uspirg.org/feature/usp/credit-report-freeze.
Standing up for our right to repair the things we own

You buy stuff. It breaks or doesn’t work right. You could throw it away and buy new stuff, but you’d rather repair it. But then you find out you can’t do it yourself—you can’t even bring it to a third party repair shop. You have to bring it back to the original company, which can charge an arm and a leg because there’s no competition—and sometimes they just won’t fix it. So you decide to throw the thing away.

This means more cost to consumers, and also means more waste. Americans dispose of 416,000 cell phones per day, and only 15 to 20 percent of electronic waste is recycled.

We imagine a different kind of system, where instead of throwing things out, we reuse, salvage and rebuild. But that means taking on the big companies who would push us into buying more and throwing more away. We’re working to give everyone access to the parts, tools and service information we need to repair products so we can keep things in use and reduce waste.

A year of milestone progress for our right to repair

It’s not as easy to repair our stuff as it should be, but after two years of running our Right to Repair campaign, we’re seeing some progress.

In 2019, the Right to Repair campaign, led by our national network of state PIRGs, Repair.org and iFixit, worked to get our model bills in front of 20 state legislatures, made our case before the Federal Trade Commission and the House Judiciary Committee, and convinced Apple and Microsoft to take small but positive steps toward making it easier to repair their products.
“Running a campaign opposed by companies worth $2.5 trillion makes any progress hard-won,” said Nathan Proctor, our national network’s Right to Repair campaign director. “But when I think back on what we’ve been able to accomplish, it gives me confidence that we can overcome the naysayers and secure our right to fix our own products.”

MASSPIRG Education Fund report shows why Bay Staters want the right to repair

Repair is popular—it saves money and cuts waste. But too many residents are hitting a wall when they try to fix the products they own.

On July 18, 2019, we released “What are Bay Staters Trying to Fix?”, a report written by our research partner MASSPIRG Education Fund, which found that more than 1.6 million unique Massachusetts users visited the site iFixit.com in 2018. People browsed the site for repair manuals and parts; they most commonly researched cell phones, laptops, automobiles and desktop computers. Many also found, however, that six out of the ten biggest manufacturers don’t sell spare parts or even provide service information, according to the report.

“Too often, consumers are stymied in their repair efforts because most of the top manufacturers won’t provide access to spare parts, repair software or service diagrams,” remarked MASSPIRG Education Fund Executive Director Janet Domenitz.

It’s clear: We need manufacturers to make repairs possible, or we need lawmakers to make our Right to Repair the law.

Nathan Proctor advocated for our right to repair at the FTC

We’ve been telling everybody who will listen that the companies that make electronics and other products should make it easier for us to repair our stuff when it breaks. In July, we got to tell the Federal Trade Commission (FTC).

Nathan was a featured speaker on July 16 at the FTC’s “Nixing the Fix” workshop, which explored restrictions on repair.

“I love Star Trek. They literally have six devices on Star Trek to do what one smartphone does,” said Nathan. “We buy these incredible $1,000 handheld supercomputers and treat them as disposable, (hopefully) recycling them for commodity value? That’s absurd and shows that something is going wrong here. One of the factors ... is the way in which the repair and maintenance of devices are severely limited by the manufacturers.”

Nathan delivered petitions signed by 7,900 supporters to the FTC calling for action to make it easier to repair our stuff.
Getting the lead out of school drinking water

Lead is a potent neurotoxin, affecting how children learn, grow and behave. But lead from faucets, fountains and plumbing continues to contaminate drinking water at schools in Massachusetts and across the country, putting the health of our kids at risk. That’s why MASSPIRG is leading the effort in our state to get the lead out of school drinking water.

The grades are in: Report finds states are failing to ensure safe drinking water for our children

Lead contaminates the water coming out of drinking fountains and taps at schools across the country, and most states surveyed aren’t doing enough about it.

“Get the Lead Out,” a study jointly published March 21, 2019, by U.S. PIRG Education Fund and Environment America Research & Policy Center, examined the policies of 31 states and Washington, D.C., and assigned grades based on how well they protect children from lead in drinking water at school. Twenty-two states earned an F grade, with only Illinois and D.C. grading above the C range. Massachusetts received a D.

“Schools should be safe places for our kids to learn and play, but Massachusetts is not doing what it takes to protect our kids from lead in drinking water,” said Deirdre Cummings, legislative director with MASSPIRG. “We need policies that actually get the lead out of faucets and fountains in our schools and pre-schools.”

Results in hand, MASSPIRG focused its energy in 2019 on building support for a precedent-setting bill to get the lead out of our kids’ drinking water.
MASSPIRG lobbies to get the lead out of schools

In 2019, MASSPIRG doubled down on getting the lead out of school drinking water.

Testifying before the Massachusetts Joint Committee on the Environment, Natural Resources, and Agriculture, MASSPIRG urged the committee to pass S.500/H.774, An Act ensuring safe drinking water at schools, filed by Senator Joan Lovely (Salem), Representative Lori Ehrlich (Marblehead), and a bipartisan group of 79 legislative cosponsors. The bill would be significant in helping to get the lead out of our schools and daycare centers.

According to the lead testing data from the Department of Environmental Protection, more than half of the 43,000 taps tested from 980 schools across Massachusetts since 2016 tested positive for lead. The vast majority of those lead levels were in concentrations greater than the limit for lead recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

The bill requires: the removal of lead service lines, the largest single source of lead in water; the installation of lead-certified filters or water filling stations; and the regular and transparent testing of water at schools. The bill also establishes a health-based lead level standard for schools and child care centers of 1 ppb—the standard recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics—and requires the immediate shut-off of outlets with elevated levels of lead.

“Passage of this bill will immediately improve the health and safety of our children, their teachers and staff, and all those who visit and participate in school programs,” testified Deirdre.

In addition, MASSPIRG helped secure $5 million to help schools get the lead out of their drinking water. In January 2020, the state used that funding to launch a new program to provide schools with water filling stations certified to remove lead and to provide water testing for schools that have not yet been tested.

Schools should be safe places for our kids to learn and play. We need policies that actually get the lead out of faucets and fountains in our schools and pre-schools.

Deirdre Cummings (center) testifies in favor of funding and reforms to get the lead out of school drinking water. Looking on are bill sponsors state Sen. Joan Lovely (center, back) and State Rep. Lori Ehrlich (right).

On Dec. 12, 2019, the Legislature approved $5 million for remediation of lead-contaminated drinking water in Massachusetts schools and child care centers.
2019 ANNUAL REPORT

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