Finding common ground and making real progress

Dear MASSPIRG member,

Thank you for opening this report on our action, progress and results in 2020—a year that many Americans wish they could forget.

As the nation grappled with COVID-19, many of our national network’s advocates and organizers turned their focus to strategies designed to save as many lives as possible.

Our staff and many of our supporters joined public health and medical groups in urging federal leaders to centralize the medical supply chain to ensure critical supplies reached areas most in need. As cases surged in the summer and fall, we joined health care workers in calling on states and federal leaders to put public health first by scaling back reopening until the virus could be suppressed. And, with the announcement of promising vaccine trial results as the year came to a close, we organized online forums with expert panelists to identify strategies for vaccinating as many people as possible as quickly as possible.

Meanwhile, PIRG’s consumer watchdogs continued to monitor the marketplace and give consumers resources to protect themselves. After a report by U.S. PIRG Education Fund revealed rampant price surges for hand sanitizer and masks on Amazon in March 2020, for example, we started a call for the world’s largest online marketplace to adopt controls to protect Americans from price surges for essential items.

As COVID-19 cases climbed in the spring of 2020, it became vitally important for hospitals to keep ventilators in service as much as possible. Our Right to Repair campaign mobilized quickly to call on manufacturers to lower barriers to ventilator repair, and, in April, several major manufacturers did exactly that.

All of these efforts—in addition to our ongoing work to cut down on plastic waste, reduce our exposure to toxic chemicals, and more—were made possible by your support. Our country will always face challenges. As the American people decide how to meet them, it’s our job to offer a voice for the public interest. We’re grateful to you and so many others for granting us this privilege.

Thank you.

Janet Domenitz
Executive Director
Democracy for the people

Every American has the fundamental right to vote and have that vote counted. In 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic posed serious challenges to that right, MASSPIRG jumped into action to advocate for universal vote by mail and other measures that ensured everyone could vote safely in the 2020 elections.

Despite pandemic, Massachusetts elections shatter turnout records

DEC. 1, 2020: With record turnout in both our September primary and the November general election, Massachusetts voters set the standard for safe voting during a pandemic, and the template for the future of our state’s democracy.

Turnout for our U.S. Senate primary—more than 1.7 million people—surpassed the previous record by nearly 350,000 votes. And turnout for the general election exceeded that of previous elections as well, totaling more than 3.6 million votes.

These record-breaking results were due in part to an emergency law, championed by MASSPIRG and the Election Modernization Coalition and passed by the state Legislature in July, which established mail-in voting and expanded early voting in Massachusetts. And the numbers speak for themselves—approximately 41 percent of voters cast ballots through the mail or secure drop boxes, 28 percent voted early in person, and 31 percent voted in person on election day.

All told, Massachusetts boasted a 72 percent voter turnout for the General Elections. Voter registration numbers were also up, and the fact that so many new voters participated in our democracy—during a time when nationwide voter registration rates were down due to COVID-19—demonstrates that commonsense reforms such as online voter registration have a critical and clear impact in ensuring our elections are more accessible.

“These voting changes have been a huge success and should be made permanent,” said MASSPIRG Executive Director Janet Domenitz. “Our government works better when more people participate, and we want the increase in voter participation to continue after the pandemic is over.”
Responding to COVID-19

The coronavirus pandemic poses the greatest threat to Americans’ health and safety in a century. But through the course of 2020, the United States lacked a coordinated federal response to the crisis.

As COVID-19 cases started to climb, our national network assembled a team of advocates and policy experts to research and elevate strategies for protecting public health and turning the tide on the pandemic. Working with health care professionals, and with the support of people like you, we advocated for measures to suppress the virus, increase testing, keep health care workers safe, protect consumers and more. Here’s some of the work that you helped make possible in this unprecedented year.

A call to shut down, start over and do it right

JULY 2020: Hundreds of thousands of Americans have died from COVID-19. With a more effective response, we could have saved many of those lives.

But we failed to shut down properly, failed to stamp out the virus, and rushed to reopen the economy before we were prepared to contain future outbreaks with testing and tracing.

Between mid-July and the end of August—as COVID cases rose—nearly 1,400 medical professionals signed an open letter calling on then-President Donald Trump and the nation’s governors to again shut down non-essential activity and to this time stamp out the virus and scale up containment before reopening in measured increments.

The letter, organized by our national network, earned widespread coverage by news outlets including CNN, Forbes and USA Today.
“Mr. Trump, federal administration, honorable governors: We remind you that history has its eyes on you,” wrote Matt Wellington, director of our national network’s public health campaigns, in the letter.

**PIRG to federal lawmakers: Ramp up COVID testing, PPE production**

**NOV. 24, 2020:** As COVID-19 cases and deaths reached new highs in November 2020, Americans desperately needed stronger action to suppress the coronavirus and protect the health care workers who protect all of us.

Our national network urged federal lawmakers to provide at least $75 billion to help states ramp up their testing efforts and to boost production of personal protective equipment (PPE) by requiring the Trump administration to fully utilize the Defense Production Act.

Scaled-up testing allows states to catch isolated cases before they become full-scale outbreaks. Meanwhile, increased PPE production helps ensure that frontline workers have the supplies they need to protect themselves and their patients from the virus.

“Americans have sacrificed so much since March, but our leaders haven’t stepped up to meet that sacrifice,” said Matt Wellington. “Our best defenses against COVID-19 are widespread testing and sufficient PPE, yet we still have nowhere near enough of either.”

**Panel experts discussed COVID-19 vaccination with U.S. PIRG’s Matt Wellington**

**NOV. 16, 2020:** In November 2020, pharmaceutical companies Moderna and Pfizer announced promising results for their COVID-19 vaccines, prompting questions about what the public should expect and when.

To answer these and other questions, our national network’s public health campaigns director, Matt Wellington, was joined by public health experts Drs. Syra Madad, Saad B. Omer, Krutika Kuppalli and Trudy Larson for the first in an ongoing series of panel discussions.

The experts discussed trial results for the emerging vaccines, obstacles to distributing the vaccines across the country, and what to expect once vaccines are rolled out to the public.

“Our biggest vulnerability is not the vaccine anymore. Increasingly, it’s vaccination,” said Dr. Omer, director of the Yale Institute for Global Health. “We should demand the same level of rigor in vaccine acceptance science as we demand in terms of vaccine development science.”

Video of the full panel discussions can be viewed on our national partner U.S. PIRG’s Facebook page.
For more than 40 years, PIRG’s consumer watchdogs have identified threats in the marketplace and advocated for stronger consumer protections. In 2020, as Americans faced new challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic—and navigated existing problems exacerbated by the crisis—MASSPIRG responded. And, thanks to your support, we helped push a landmark law to protect Americans from surprise medical billing over the finish line.

**250,000 call on airlines to refund COVID-related cancellations**

**JUNE 3, 2020:** If you canceled your flight because of the coronavirus pandemic, you should be able to get a refund for your tickets.

On May 13, MASSPIRG Executive Director Janet Domenitz emceed a webinar in which U.S. Sen. Ed Markey (Mass.), representatives from Consumer Reports, and other public interest advocates discussed their call for airlines to return cash—not just vouchers—to travelers who cancel their plans due to COVID-19.

Along with our national network, the groups also delivered nearly 250,000 petition signatures calling on major airlines to provide full refunds for these cancellations. Even when stay-at-home orders were in effect across the country, most airlines offered vouchers instead of refunds—despite the industry receiving a $50 billion CARES Act bailout.

“Frankly, that doesn’t fly,” said Janet. “It’s customers’ money. Airlines have a responsibility to return it on request during this crisis.”
Patricia Kelmar advocated for the passage of an Ohio bill to stop surprise medical billing in an interview with In Focus, aired on Spectrum News 1, in November 2020.

**Landmark health care law protects patients from surprise medical billing**

**DEC. 27, 2021:** Maybe this has happened to you: After a visit to the hospital or emergency room, you get stuck with an unexpected bill for hundreds or even thousands of dollars from an out-of-network provider.

It’s called surprise medical billing, and a bipartisan bill to stop the practice was signed into law on Dec. 27, 2020, as part of a coronavirus relief package. The No Surprises Act will protect patients from “balance-billing,” a practice where out-of-network providers charge the difference between their fees and the maximum allowed by patients’ insurance.

The law also establishes an arbitration process for providers and insurance companies to work out a reasonable payment to further rein in costs. The No Surprises Act allows even stronger state laws to remain in place.

“This undoubtedly is the most far-reaching consumer health protection that Congress has passed in years,” said Patricia Kelmar, our national network’s health care campaigns director.

“While the final law is not exactly the legislation we called for, we’ll work hard to ensure strong regulations are put in place and consumers know their rights.”

**MASSPIRG helps secure passage of Student Loan Borrower Bill of Rights**

**JAN. 15, 2021:** Student debt is growing faster in Massachusetts than any other state—but a new law promises to help the Bay State combat this crisis.

On Jan. 6, in the final hours of the 2020 legislative session, state lawmakers passed the Student Loan Borrower Bill of Rights, which will provide new protections against unfair and deceptive loan servicing practices to nearly 1 million student borrowers across the state. Gov. Charlie Baker then signed the protections into law on Jan. 14.

MASSPIRG organized more than 50 state and national leaders and 113 student leaders from 19 Massachusetts colleges to deliver letters to key committee members in the Legislature.

“We commend the leadership and relentless advocacy of state Sen. Eric Lesser of Longmeadow and state Rep. Natalie Higgins of Leominster, the initial sponsors of the bill,” said Deirdre Cummings, legislative director for MASSPIRG. “Now more than ever, it is critical that we defend students from predatory loan servicers.”

MASSPIRG then called on Congress to pass legislation introduced by Sen. Markey to mandate cash refunds for canceled tickets during the coronavirus pandemic.

**FLASHBACK** — Deirdre Cummings (second from right) was joined by state legislators and consumer advocates at a 2019 State House event launching our campaign to pass the Student Loan Borrower Bill of Rights.
To stem the rising tide of plastic waste, the best thing we can do is stop using so much plastic in the first place—especially the single-use items we use once, but which can pollute our communities for a lifetime.

To stem the rising tide of plastic waste, the best thing we can do is stop using so much plastic in the first place—especially the single-use items we use once, but which can pollute our communities for a lifetime.

Working toward zero waste

With your support, MASSPIRG helped restore our state’s most effective plastics policies when they were suspended last summer. Meanwhile, we continued to make the case for a zero-waste future in Massachusetts.

Massachusetts resumes crucial waste reduction policies

AUG. 5, 2020: Over the summer of 2020, the Bay State took two major steps to get back on the path to zero waste.

On May 29, following urging from MASSPIRG and other public interest advocates, Gov. Charlie Baker restored the enforcement of the Massachusetts bottle bill. And on July 10, he rescinded an emergency order from March that had suspended the use of reusable bags and single-use plastic bag bans in 139 cities and towns.

The policies had been paused earlier in the year over safety fears amid the coronavirus pandemic. However, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention later determined that COVID-19 is primarily transmitted person-to-person rather than on surfaces such as reusable bags.

“This is a home run—good for the environment, for public health, for reducing waste, and for protecting both workers and shoppers,” said Janet Domenitz, executive director of MASSPIRG. “It’s well past time to get back to reducing plastic waste.”

Making the case for zero waste, and pushing for a plan to get there

DEC. 15, 2020: For years, MASSPIRG has been pushing for a “reduce first” approach to moving the Bay State toward a zero-waste future. And we made some key progress in 2020.

Along with the Zero Waste MA Coalition, we’ve been advocating for the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to issue a Zero Waste 2020-2030 Master Plan as part of the Solid Waste Master Plan (SWMP) that it publishes every 10 years. MASSPIRG helped pass the law that created the SWMP in the 1980s, and now we’re looking to drive even bolder action on tackling our waste crisis.

We also helped convince the DEP to hold an additional set of public hearings so that Bay Staters could make their voices heard on this issue—and more than 100 people showed up to four Zoom hearings held between July and September.

Finally, in December we issued a report entitled “Garbage in Massachusetts,” describing the pollution, the waste of money, and the public health threats posed by the two dozen landfills and incinerators in Massachusetts.
Our Right to Repair campaign took on new dimensions in response to the coronavirus pandemic, as medical repair professionals faced repair restrictions in the midst of a public health crisis. In addition, our network’s work to empower consumers and third-party repair professionals with the right to repair was recognized by business magazine Fast Company.

**MASSPIRG helps win release of vital service information for ventilators**

*APRIL 22, 2020:* In March 2020, as cases of COVID-19 mounted, it became vitally important that hospitals be able to keep ventilators in service as much as possible. But some manufacturers had restricted access to the repair documentation and service keys that biomedical repair technicians need to fix and maintain these lifesaving devices, prompting action from MASSPIRG and our national network.

More than 43,000 petition signers and state treasurers and auditors from nine states joined our network’s call for manufacturers to help hospitals confront the pandemic by releasing ventilator service information. And in April, manufacturers including GE, Medtronic and Fisher & Paykel started to make that requested service information available.

“I want to thank ventilator manufacturers for providing access to service documents,” said Nathan Proctor, our national network’s Right to Repair campaign director. “We hope this also serves as an example of how restricting repair is harmful. When technicians can’t access service manuals, it creates unnecessary barriers to fixing lifesaving equipment.”

**Right to Repair named a finalist for Fast Company’s ‘World Changing ideas’**

*APRIL 28, 2020:* Right to Repair is a simple concept: If you own something, you should be allowed to repair it. Too often, though, we are blocked from repairing our devices for proprietary reasons, leading to unnecessary costs and electronic waste.

In April, business magazine Fast Company selected our national network’s Right to Repair campaign as a finalist for its World Changing Ideas awards in the Politics & Policy category.

“We appreciate Fast Company’s recognition of the importance of the right to repair,” said Nathan Proctor. “It seems like such a simple premise, but it’s clear that we need to fight for it.”

In 2020, Right to Repair legislation was introduced or carried over in 20 state legislatures.
Is it really worth risking our health so our hands don’t get greasy?” asks Danielle Melgar outside of a McDonald’s in Illinois, where the fast food giant is headquartered.

Alongside firefighters and state Rep. Marjorie Decker, Janet Domenitz spoke at a 2019 press conference about the urgent need to get toxic flame retardant chemicals out of our homes and our products.

Standing up for a future that’s toxic-free

We shouldn’t have to worry about coming into contact with toxic chemicals in our daily lives. In 2020, consumers saw wins for a healthier marketplace as Massachusetts banned harmful flame-retardant chemicals and Johnson & Johnson ended North American sales of its talc-based baby powder. But there’s still more work ahead to make sure our future is toxic-free.

New Massachusetts law will protect families and firefighters from harmful flame-retardant chemicals

JAN. 2, 2021: Massachusetts closed out 2020 with a landmark ban on toxic flame retardants, which threaten the health of consumers and firefighters while doing little to inhibit fires.

On Jan. 1, Gov. Charlie Baker signed the MASSPIRG-backed Children and Firefighters Protection Act into law. The act bans 11 flame retardants in children’s products, mattresses, household furniture, carpeting and window coverings, and gives the Department of Environmental Protection the authority to ban additional chemicals that are hazardous to human health and the environment. Consumer, public health and firefighter groups alike have supported the bill since it was first filed in 2013.

“The origin story of flame retardants comes from Big Tobacco, which promoted this toxic product to take attention away from cigarette fires in homes. These ‘retardants’ did not, in fact, inhibit fires, but they did spread polluting and unhealthy toxic chemicals,” said MASSPIRG Executive Director Janet Domenitz. “We congratulate this bill’s sponsors, state Rep. Marjorie Decker and state Sen. Cynthia Creem, for championing such an important step toward a healthier Massachusetts.”
**In a win for consumer safety, Johnson & Johnson stops sale of talc-based baby powder**

**MAY 19, 2020:** A product too often contaminated with toxic asbestos shouldn’t be on store shelves.

That’s why it was a major win for consumers when Johnson & Johnson announced May 19 that it would stop selling talc-based baby powder in the U.S. and Canada.

Because the minerals are often found near each other in nature, talc can be contaminated with asbestos, a known carcinogen, when mined. As of March 2020, there were more than 19,000 lawsuits filed against Johnson & Johnson by plaintiffs claiming that the company’s baby powder caused their cancer.

“Johnson & Johnson’s decision to get talc out of its baby powders sold in the U.S. and Canada is important,” said Danielle Melgar, toxics advocate with our national research partner U.S. PIRG Education Fund.

“But there’s more to do to protect ourselves from toxic chemicals in the products we use every day.”

U.S. PIRG Education Fund called on Johnson & Johnson to eliminate talc in its baby powder worldwide and on the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to ban talc in consumer products.

**Bayer to pay $10 billion to settle Roundup lawsuits with cancer victims**

**JUNE 24, 2020:** A weed killer whose main ingredient may be linked to cancer has no business being sprayed on our lawns, parks and playgrounds unless and until it’s proven safe.

In a landmark settlement in June 2020, Bayer, the new owner of Monsanto and its popular weed killer Roundup, agreed to pay more than $10 billion to nearly 100,000 plaintiffs who alleged the pesticide causes cancer. Glyphosate, the main chemical ingredient in Roundup, was classified as a probable carcinogen by the World Health Organization in 2015.

“The story that Bayer and Monsanto have pushed for years—that Roundup doesn’t cause cancer—doesn’t mesh with the experiences of thousands of people whose contact with the herbicide has irrevocably changed their lives,” said Faye Park, president of our national partner U.S. PIRG.

Our national network is continuing to advocate for bans on Roundup and other glyphosate-based pesticides unless and until they are proven safe.
Transforming transportation

In 2020, Massachusetts made crucial progress toward making our transportation systems cleaner, healthier and more efficient. Meanwhile, our national network threw its support behind a federal bill to secure vital funding for sustainable transportation.

Massachusetts signs landmark commitment to slash climate-changing transportation emissions

Jan. 4, 2021: After a year in which wildfires, floods and hurricanes brought the urgent reality of climate change into stark relief, the Bay State is forging a new path toward cleaner air and a healthier climate.

On Dec. 21, Massachusetts signed onto the landmark Transportation and Climate Initiative Program (TCI-P), which will invest in clean transportation projects such as zero-emission electric vehicles, expanded public transit options, and walking and biking infrastructure. Rhode Island, Connecticut and Washington, D.C., have also joined the initiative, and several other Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states have expressed support as well.

“Transportation remains the biggest culprit in the commonwealth for climate-damaging emissions, and we need to shift our transportation priorities if we are to solve the climate crisis,” said Ethan Evans, MASSPIRG’s transportation campaign associate. “We need urgent, ambitious action from our leaders, and today we saw what can happen when states work together for a common cause.”

A poll by Our Transportation Future found that 70 percent of voters across the region support the TCI-P as a means to jumpstart the economy and cut transportation emissions.
All new cars sold in Massachusetts set to be zero-emission vehicles by 2035

JAN. 6, 2021: You can expect to see a sharp rise in the number of clean electric cars on Routes 128, 495 and other Massachusetts highways and roads.

On Dec. 30, Gov. Charlie Baker announced plans to phase out the sale of new gas-powered cars in Massachusetts by 2035. Following California’s lead, the Bay State is the second in the nation to commit to phasing out gas-powered cars—a commitment that would drastically curtail Massachusetts’ carbon pollution, since transportation accounts for more than 40 percent of the state’s emissions.

“Massachusetts’ plan for all new cars to be electric will drive us in the right direction to address health-harming and climate-changing air pollution,” said MASSPIRG Transportation Advocate John Stout.

“But electric vehicles are just a part of the solution—we also need to invest more in public transportation and other better, cleaner options that will allow people to drive less.”

House transportation spending bill prioritizes fixing infrastructure, sustainable investment

JUNE 3, 2020: A 2020 House spending bill signalled changing winds in the movement for cleaner, more efficient transportation. On June 3, federal lawmakers put forward the INVEST in America Act—a nearly $500 billion transportation spending bill supported by our national network.

While the proposal allotted more than twice as much funding for highways as it did for public transit and rail, it stipulated that funds should be used to repair and improve existing infrastructure before being used on new highway expansions. The bill also included key provisions for expanding public transit, building electric buses and electric vehicle infrastructure, and making streets safer for walking and biking.

“Our national network’s director of environment campaigns, Matt Casale. “While this bill is not perfect, it represents a major step forward,” said our national network’s director of environment campaigns, Matt Casale. “It doesn’t continue the status quo, and instead takes a new ‘fix-it-first’ and more carbon-conscious approach to support a safer, cleaner and greener transportation network.”

Electric cars will be key in the effort to slash health-harming and climate-changing transportation pollution.
Member Spotlight

Our work is made possible by the support of you, our members. This year we’re highlighting the story of one of our national network’s members, in her own words.

Clare Feinson

As a child, I was often involved in causes I cared about. I collected money for UNICEF at Halloween and I was always up for service projects through the Girl Scouts. My parents were active in political and volunteer organizations and involved me in mailing newsletters, organizing events, leafleting and getting petitions signed.

My involvement with PIRG started when I was a graduate student at George Washington University, where I served as the chair of D.C. PIRG for a year. I think your organization has done a great job selecting issues where the public interest needs an advocate. Though I have not been involved in the day-to-day workings of PIRG for a long time, I continue to support the work that you do.

Our Staff (partial list)

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Legislative Director

Jeanne Foy  
Director, Consumer Action Center

Matt Casale  
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