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.

Massachusetts 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, MASSPIRG 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 consortiums, similar to the one started by Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan and the National Governors Association.

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.

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. Charlie Baker increase testing.

Sydney Riess, public health campaign associate with our national network (top left), virtually joined Florida residents who have lost loved ones to COVID-19 in October to call on Gov. Ron DeSantis to adopt a statewide mask mandate and to increase testing and contact tracing.

PUBLIC HEALTH

MASSPIRG’s pandemic response

Since the onset of the pandemic in March, we at MASSPIRG have used our expertise as public health and consumer protection advocates to play a role in the much-needed community response to COVID-19.

In the spring, MASSPIRG helped to organize a letter from more than 100 municipal leaders from 17 states exhorting then-President Trump and Congress to get personal protective equipment (PPE) and other critical supplies to the states.

Then, in the fall, we released a report authored by MASSPIRG Education Fund and Frontier Group showing that nursing homes were experiencing dangerous shortages of PPE, and we renewed our call for Congress to pass the Medical Supply Transparency and Delivery Act to get nursing home residents and workers the resources they need to stay safe. MASSPIRG also supported new statewide protections from price gouging, which were enacted this summer.

Through the coronavirus crisis and beyond, MASSPIRG will continue standing up for public...
RIGHT TO REPAIR

MASSPIRG 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.

MASSPIRG 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.

ZERO OUT TOXICS

Testing suggests PFAS in food packaging at McDonald’s

Some food packaging at popular restaurant chains—including McDonald’s Big Mac container—may contain toxic PFAS chemicals, found a report co-released by Illinois PIRG Education Fund, 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.

“We shouldn’t have to worry that our lunch is exposing us to toxic chemicals,” said Danielle Melgar, toxics advocate for Illinois PIRG Education Fund.

MASSPIRG is calling on McDonald’s to use only PFAS-free packaging.
Despite pandemic, Massachusetts elections shatter turnout records

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 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 vote by mail and expanded early voting in Massachusetts.

“The numbers speak for themselves—these voting changes have been a huge success and should be made permanent,” said MASSPIRG Executive Director Janet Domenitz. “Everyone wants this increase in voter participation to continue after the pandemic is over.”