How can we protect patients if we don’t protect health care workers?

By Matt Wellington, director of public health campaigns with our national network

Four months into the COVID-19 pandemic, health professionals in many parts of the country still didn’t have the personal protective equipment (PPE) needed to keep themselves safe while they save lives.

In July, as COVID-19 hospitalizations surged in several states, the fragile supply chain for masks, gloves, gowns and other medical supplies was put under increased strain as many states continued to reopen—some even as case numbers rose—and non-health care businesses in need of PPE increased demand even further.

Early in the pandemic, an insatiable demand for PPE far outstripped a limited supply. Many stakeholders agree that the supply has increased since then, but serious issues remain, including a lack of central, transparent coordination for how those materials are distributed.

At the time of writing, states are still being forced to compete against each other and the federal government for critical medical supplies. The lengths to which state and local officials have had to go to procure the supplies they need are well documented.

We’re calling for a better system

The good news is that we can fix this. At the same time that health professionals have been calling for more supplies, logistics experts have been citing the need for central coordination of the supply chain.

Our national network has mobilized local elected officials and leading medical experts around that call for central coordination. We’ve
given physicians a megaphone to have their voices heard and we’ve brought together stakeholders to share ideas and challenges for moving forward.

Previous efforts by the Trump administration to source and distribute PPE have fallen short and have focused on getting supplies to private companies rather than impacted areas. To ensure that health professionals and other frontline workers get what they need to stay safe, the federal government needs to create a centralized system that gets medical supplies directly to impacted areas in a timely and transparent way.

The Medical Supply Transparency and Delivery Act would accomplish that. The legislation, introduced by Sens. Tammy Baldwin (Wis.) and Chris Murphy (Conn.) in April, would:

- Create a central coordinator position to oversee federal purchasing and distribution of medical supplies. This person would have the full authority to utilize the Defense Production Act in order to compel companies to produce necessary medical equipment.
- Establish transparency and accountability in handling of the medical supply chain by initiating public weekly reports of current supply stockpiles and projected needs, as well as public posting of states’ requests for medical equipment and locations where supplies are distributed.

Thousands joined MASSPIRG and our national network in calling on the Senate to pass these measures, which are critical for producing more personal protective equipment and allocating those materials in a transparent way. But the Senate has yet to approve the legislation at the time of writing.

Therefore, in July, a coalition of more than 50 health and medical groups petitioned U.S. senators, including Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, to include the Medical Supply Transparency and Delivery Act in the next coronavirus stimulus package, as the House did in May.

Our national network urged the inclusion of these vital measures that would serve to protect the people protecting us.

We’re nowhere near out of the woods yet on COVID-19. But we can fix the mistakes that put health workers and the public at greater risk by making sure our supply chains are organized to get PPE quickly and transparently to the places that need it most.


**DEMOCRACY**

**Massachusetts approves safer voting options during the pandemic**

With the fall elections looming in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, MASSPIRG has continued to work for safer, more secure and more accessible voting options for Bay Staters.

On July 1, Gov. Charlie Baker signed into law significant new protections for voters, which aim to ensure that no one has to choose between our health and our right to vote.

MASSPIRG—a member of the Election Modernization Coalition—along with 80 organizations across the state, advocated for several months in support of this bill. The law includes: universal vote-by-mail, expanded early voting, an online portal for voters to track the progress of their absentee ballots, public health safeguards at polling places, and more.

“We are gratified that this bill has become law,” said MASSPIRG Executive Director Janet Donenitz. “Moving forward, we are committed to doing public education about these important changes, and working together in 2021 for additional and more permanent reforms.”
ZERO WASTE

Massachusetts resumes crucial plastic waste reduction policies

This summer, 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 frozen single-use plastic bag bans in 139 cities and towns.

The policies had been paused earlier this year over safety fears amid the coronavirus pandemic. Since then, however, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has 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.”

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.”

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

CONSUMER PROTECTION

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

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 recent call for airlines to return cash to travelers who cancel their plans due to COVID-19, and our national network’s delivery of 250,000 petition signatures echoing that call.

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.
Barriers to fixing medical equipment could threaten patients

When an essential medical device—such as a ventilator—breaks down, repairing it quickly could be a matter of life and death. The repair technicians who fix these lifesaving devices shouldn’t be impeded by unnecessary manufacturer restrictions, especially during a pandemic.

In a July survey by U.S. PIRG Education Fund, the research arm of our national network, nearly half of medical repair professionals reported having been denied access to “critical repair information, parts or service keys” for medical equipment since March.

“Delays in getting equipment running put patients at risk,” said Nathan Proctor, our network’s Right to Repair campaign director.

In April, MASSPIRG and our national network won the release of ventilator service information from manufacturers including GE and Fisher & Paykel. Now, we’re calling on legislators to stop manufacturers from restricting repair to critical medical devices.