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, MASSPIRG 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.

MASSPIRG, 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.

MASSPIRG 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 MASSPIRG 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. Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey and 32 other attorneys general from across the country signed onto a letter calling on President Trump to fully utilize the Defense Production Act (DPA) and to coordinate distribution of critical medical supplies directly to affected areas.

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. Joining the call were 12 mayors from Massachusetts, including Paul Brodeur of Melrose, Michael Cahill of Beverly, Gary Christenson of Malden, Carlo DeMaria of Everett, Kim Driscoll of Salem, Tom McGee of Lynn, Jon Mitchell of New Bedford, Alex Morse of Holyoke, Dan Rivera of Lawrence, Domenic Sarno of Springfield, Sumbul Siddiqui of Cambridge and Yvonne Spicer of Framingham.

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended our way of life. As we confront these challenges, MASSPIRG 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.

In March, a four-pack of 28 ounce Purell hand sanitizer bottles was found selling for $159 on Amazon.

**MASSPIRG’s Mission**

When consumers are cheated or the voices of ordinary citizens are drowned out by special interest lobbyists, MASSPIRG speaks up and takes action. We uncover threats to public health and well-being and fight to end them, using the time-tested tools of investigative research, media exposés, grassroots organizing, advocacy and litigation. MASSPIRG’s mission is to deliver persistent, results-oriented public interest activism that protects consumers, encourages a fair, sustainable economy, and fosters responsive, democratic government.

**NEWS BRIEFS**

**Massachusetts moves closer toward safe drinking water in schools**

When students return to school, our state could be on its way toward safer drinking water if lawmakers approve a MASSPIRG-backed bill.

On March 9, a key state legislative committee unanimously passed a bill to establish a health-based lead level standard for schools and child care centers, and to take other steps to minimize lead in school drinking water. A significant win for our Get the Lead Out campaign, the bill addresses many of the concerns raised in a March 2019 MASSPIRG Education Fund report warning that many Massachusetts schools had unsafe levels of lead in their drinking water.
“Time and time again, Massachusetts has been a leader in protecting our children’s health and safety,” said Deirdre Cummings, legislative director of MASSPIRG. “Massachusetts should take this opportunity and put ourselves ahead of the curve in getting the lead out of drinking water in our schools and day care centers.”

As of this writing, the bill awaits approval by the Senate Ways and Means Committee.

TRANSFORM TRANSPORTATION

Massachusetts Senate passes bill to switch MBTA to electric buses

Today, nearly all of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority’s (MBTA) buses run on fossil fuels, contributing to global warming and air pollution. That could soon change.

On Jan. 30, the Massachusetts Senate passed a MASSPIRG-backed bill that would require the MBTA to fully transition to electric buses by 2040. The effect would be staggering: 55,000 tons of greenhouse gases would no longer be emitted each year, the equivalent of taking more than 10,600 cars off the road. The bill would also permanently authorize the commonwealth’s existing electric vehicle tax credit.

“For too long, our communities have been subjected to toxic pollution from cars, trucks and buses that run on fossil fuels,” said Matt Casale, director of MASSPIRG’s Transform Transportation campaign. “The sooner that all Massachusetts residents can reap the benefits of electric buses, the better it will be for our kids, our communities and our planet.”

As of this writing, the bill sits with the Massachusetts House of Representatives.

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.

Support our work in the public interest by including a gift to MASSPIRG or MASSPIRG Education Fund in your will, trust or retirement accounts.

For more information call 1-800-841-7299 or send an email to: plannedgiving@masspirg.org
New federal bill calls for U.S. to move beyond plastic

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.

“Were inundated by plastic pollution, but we make more each year,” said Alex Trueove, 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.”

THANKS TO YOU

Dear MASSPIRG 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,

Janet Domenitz
Executive Director
info@masspirg.org