CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC
CORONAVIRUS CASES TOP 4.1 MILLION IN THE UNITED STATES

Illinois PIRG

2020 ANNUAL REPORT
Finding common ground and making real progress

Dear Illinois PIRG 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.

Abe Scarr
State Director
Take our power back

In 2020, Commonwealth Edison (ComEd), Illinois’ largest electric utility, admitted to actions that federal prosecutors described as a corrupt bribery scheme going back almost a decade. ComEd used its influence to win policies granting it automatic rate hikes, weakening the Illinois utility regulator, and bailing out nuclear power plants owned by its parent company, Exelon. In response, we launched the Take Our Power Back campaign to advocate for consumers and true utility reform in Springfield.

Report finds ComEd scheme caused utility rate hikes for Illinoisans

DEC. 8, 2020: For nearly a decade, corruption in Springfield has led to higher utility bills for Illinoisans.

On Dec. 1, Illinois PIRG released “Guaranteed Profits, Broken Promises,” a report examining the 2011 Energy Infrastructure Modernization Act (EIMA). The law marked the beginning of years of actions that, according to federal prosecutors, constituted a corrupt bribery scheme on the part of the utility Commonwealth Edison (ComEd) to win favorable legislation.

The report found that EIMA guaranteed ComEd and parent company Exelon’s profits while failing to adequately ensure customer and public benefits—and in fact, Illinoisans have been paying 37 percent higher electricity delivery rates as a result. In December, Illinois PIRG launched Take Our Power Back—a campaign calling for accountability, restitution and reform—following the report’s release.

“In many ways, the revelation of the bribery scandal simply confirmed what anybody paying attention already knew: ComEd had influenced the regulatory system in Illinois to the point where it was allowed to accrue the financial benefits of investing in better utility infrastructure without the promised benefits of much of that infrastructure ever actually materializing,” said Illinois PIRG State Director Abe Scarr.

“ComEd and other utilities have held too much power in Springfield for too long. We look forward to working with Gov. J.B. Pritzker and members of the Illinois General Assembly to right the wrongs of the past decade by passing laws that place the public interest at the center of Illinois’ transition to a clean energy future.”
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.
Abe Scarr spoke with ABC7 Chicago about the excessive maintenance costs that were being unfairly passed on to Peoples Gas customers. The company’s pipe replacement program has far exceeded its budget, while failing to deliver on many of the consumer benefits it promised.

PIRG Consumer Watchdog on the alert

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 old ones such as excessive surcharges on Illinoisans’ energy bills—Illinois PIRG responded. And, thanks to your support, we helped push a landmark law to protect Americans from surprise medical billing over the finish line.

State and local leaders issue call to rein in reckless spending by Peoples Gas

AUG. 21, 2020: After another winter of rising utility bills, Illinois leaders joined Illinois PIRG in calling for a reform of the troubled Peoples Gas pipe replacement program.

On April 24, the Chicago City Council passed a resolution calling on Gov. J.B. Pritzker and the Illinois General Assembly to “restore necessary oversight” of the Peoples Gas pipe replacement program, which for years has been beset by management missteps, cost overruns and an inability to reduce pipeline failure rates. Mayor Lori Lightfoot and a broad coalition of consumer groups, including Illinois PIRG, supported the City Council’s resolution.

“We didn’t give Peoples Gas a blank check, and we can’t afford to waste money on upgrades we don’t need,” said Illinois PIRG State Director Abe Scarr.

In August, Gov. Pritzker added his support when he announced his intention to end the state law that allows gas utilities to circumvent traditional regulatory oversight for large portions of their infrastructure spending.
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.”

Report finds PPE shortages at 1 in 5 nursing homes this summer

OCT. 27, 2020: Protecting our most vulnerable citizens and preventing further COVID-19 outbreaks means making sure our nursing homes have the masks, gowns and hand sanitizer they need to limit the spread of the coronavirus.

But the nation’s nursing homes experienced massive shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE) over the summer of 2020, a U.S. PIRG Education Fund and Frontier Group analysis of data collected by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services found.

The Oct. 27 report, covered by the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times and CBS News, found that, in August, a fifth of reporting facilities possessed less than a one-week supply of one or more types of PPE—a critical shortage by industry standards.

“It’s appalling that this is how we treat our most vulnerable—our senior citizens and people recovering from a major surgery or illness,” said U.S. PIRG Education Fund Consumer Watchdog Teresa Murray.

U.S. PIRG Education Fund recommended in its report that Congress address PPE shortages by passing the Medical Supply Transparency and Delivery Act.
Working toward zero waste

With your support, we launched a campaign urging Whole Foods to eliminate unnecessary single-use plastic packaging from its stores. Meanwhile, our network’s work to slash harmful electronic waste by empowering consumers and third-party repair professionals with the right to repair was recognized by business magazine Fast Company.

Illinois PIRG urges Whole Foods to do its part to cut plastic pollution

NOV. 30, 2020: Whole Foods isn’t living up to its planet-before-profit reputation—but lightening its plastic footprint could change that and help address our plastic waste problem.

In November 2020, Illinois PIRG launched a campaign calling for a commitment from Whole Foods to phase out single-use plastic packaging at its stores. Earlier in the year, environmental group As You Sow gave the grocery chain an “F” for its policies on plastic packaging, material that contributes to the massive amounts of plastic waste overrunning our landfills, littering our communities and polluting our planet.

“As a company with a reputation for selling food that is good for people and the planet, Whole Foods can make a big dent in reducing plastic pollution,” said Alex Truelove, Zero Waste campaign director with our national network.

“Whole Foods Market once led the industry as the first U.S. grocer to eliminate plastic grocery bags at checkout in 2008. It’s time they lead again.”

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 fix 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 our national network’s Right to Repair Campaign Director 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.
Member Spotlight

Our work is made possible by the support of you, our members. This year we wanted to highlight the story of one of those members, in his own words.

Nick Bridge

I grew up in Champaign, and the first time I took action on a social issue was when Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated—I was in college and marched with other demonstrators at the county courthouse in Urbana.

Since then, I’ve endeavored to support organizations that get at the root causes of problems in our society, as seemingly normal consumer and lifestyle choices often have effects beyond our initial perception. I like that PIRG digs down and finds ways the system has been rigged against our long-term welfare and tries to translate that into legislative and legal action at the state, local and national levels. Problems like plastic waste in particular need this multi-pronged approach—and I know PIRG will keep working until the job’s done.

Our Staff (partial list)

Abe Scarr
State Director

Sabrina Clevenger
Associate, Illinois PIRG

Faye Park
President, U.S. PIRG

Ed Mierzwinski
Senior Director, Federal Consumer Program

Teresa Murray
Consumer Watchdog

Alex Truelove
Director, Zero Waste Campaign

Patricia Kelmar
Director, Health Care Campaigns

Nathan Proctor
Director, Campaign for the Right to Repair

Allison Cairo
Vice President and National Field Director

Jenny Douglass
Member Retention Coordinator

Pam Clough
Director, Donor Development Program

Matt Wellington
Director, Public Health Campaigns

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