Illinois PIRG

2018 PROGRAM REPORT
Finding common ground and making real progress

Dear Illinois PIRG Member,

Given the partisan rancor in our nation, one might reasonably wonder if it’s still possible for Americans to find common ground and solve problems.

It is. And we have examples:

1. Consumers, patients, doctors and nurses from across the country came together to stop the food industry’s overuse of antibiotics, a practice that leads to antibiotic-resistant bacteria—or “superbugs”—that cut short tens of thousands of lives each year. This wasn’t about red America or blue America, it was all Americans sharing a common interest that convinced McDonald’s to commit to reducing antibiotics in its beef supply chain. (See page 3 for more.)

2. Illinois PIRG and our partners worked hard to make the case for forward-thinking transportation policy as candidates debated the state’s infrastructure needs during election season. After years of advocacy and organizing, we’re starting to see a shift in the state’s spending priorities—away from wasteful highway expansions and toward better public transportation, walking and biking options, and electric vehicle infrastructure. (See page 2 for more.)

3. Our democracy works best when everyone participates, and we believe every American should be registered to vote automatically. That’s why we worked to advocate for automatic voter registration in Illinois, and our national network is doing the same across the country. (See page 7 to read about how we helped pass automatic voter registration in Illinois.)

Many threats to our health and safety cut across political divides. When we get beyond the filter bubbles that inhibit real dialogue in Washington, D.C., and on social media, we can find support for solutions to these problems and others like them.

Your support for Illinois PIRG is helping to bring people together and find answers for a healthier, cleaner, safer and more secure future for all Americans. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Abe Scarr
State Director, Illinois PIRG
Advocating for 21st-century transportation solutions

Our communities are rapidly evolving in the 21st century, and our transportation system needs to keep up. Last year, Illinois PIRG made progress to meet our transportation needs of the future.

Even though demand for alternative transportation options is gaining popular ground, our state leaders continue to pour our tax dollars into new highway expansion projects.

Nine highway projects across the country—slated to cost $30 billion—exemplify the need for a fresh approach to transportation planning and spending, according to the fourth annual “Highway Boondoggles” report by our research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund.

The Illinois State Toll Highway Authority is moving to revive a project to extend Route 53 in Lake County, which has been under consideration since 1993. The proposed 25-mile extension is estimated to cost between $2.3 billion and $2.6 billion, which, even with dubious funding options including tolling, congestion pricing and a gas tax, the state’s budget can’t cover.

Local opponents of the project have argued that the road would accelerate suburban sprawl and result in more traffic on local roads, and the environmental impact has yet to be determined.

“The money we spend today decides how we get around tomorrow,” said Matt Casale, our national transportation campaign director. “We need to avoid the type of highway projects that should be in our rearview mirror.”

Illinois PIRG is calling on legislators to adopt a fix-it-first approach to transportation planning, to stop highway boondoggles, and to invest in the future of transportation. We need to fix the infrastructure we have and make changes to fit our transportation needs of the future.
Stopping the misuse of life-saving antibiotics

Because of your support this past year, Illinois PIRG and our national network were able to help reduce the overuse of antibiotics on factory farms.

The overuse and misuse of antibiotics in humans, animals and agriculture is creating “superbugs” that are resistant to treatment. The World Health Organization has named antibiotic resistance one of the top 10 global threats to human health. According to an estimate from researchers at Washington University School of Medicine, as many as 162,000 people die from multidrug-resistant infections annually in the U.S., making these infections the third leading cause of death.

Illinois PIRG and our national network have gathered support from activists, corporate actors and health professionals across the country to address the looming dangers of antibiotic resistance. A group of physicians and health experts, The Health Professional Action Network, is ready to be our voice in the media, in state capitols, and wherever we need to counter misleading claims or advocate for new solutions.

In honor of World Antibiotics Awareness Week in November, our national network partner, U.S. PIRG Education Fund, featured seven infectious disease physicians, specialists, scholars and pediatricians from our Health Professionals Action Network in an eight-part video series. These champions of medicine joined staff to discuss antibiotic resistance and the need to reduce antibiotic use in human and veterinary medicine.
On Nov. 15, U.S. PIRG Education Fund joined a group of panelists at Harvard University to discuss the future of antibiotics. Speakers presented solutions such as stopping the routine use of antibiotics on factory farms, investing more time and money into developing new antibiotics, and implementing legislation that curbs the overuse of antibiotics.

Setting off a chain reaction
In October, Illinois PIRG released our national network’s “Chain Reaction IV” report grading the top 25 U.S. burger chains on their antibiotics policies. Most, including McDonald’s, received failing grades. BurgerFi and Shake Shack were the only two chains to earn “A” grades for sourcing beef raised without routine antibiotics.

The routine use of antibiotics in livestock significantly contributes to the spread of antibiotic resistance. In fact, nearly two-thirds of the medically important antibiotics sold in the U.S. are intended for use in livestock and poultry operations.

Fast food restaurants, as one of the largest markets for meat in the U.S., can play an instrumental role in pushing producers to use antibiotics responsibly if they commit to only purchasing beef raised without routine antibiotics.

Throughout 2018, Illinois PIRG and our national network called on McDonald’s to phase routine antibiotics out of their beef supply chains.

And in December, McDonald’s showed us it was listening. The company committed to monitor and set reduction targets for antibiotic use in its global beef supply chain by the end of 2020.

“McDonald’s made a commitment to monitor and set reduction targets for antibiotic use in its global beef supply chain by the end of 2020. Whether you eat at McDonald’s or not, this is a huge victory for public health. “The Golden Arches just raised the bar for responsible antibiotic use in meat production. We can’t afford to misuse these precious medicines. Otherwise, we risk losing our ability to treat life-threatening infections,” said Matt Wellington, director of our national network’s Stop the Overuse of Antibiotics campaign. “McDonald’s new commitment is a promising step forward that will help preserve antibiotics for the future, and that’s something we should all be happy about.”

McDonald’s made a commitment
Antibiotics vital to human medicine are routinely given to animals to help them survive crowded, stressful and unsanitary conditions, regardless of whether the animals are actually sick, threatening the efficacy of our life-saving medications. That’s why Illinois PIRG and our national network have been calling on fast food chains such as McDonald’s to phase routine antibiotics out of their beef supply chains.
Protecting student borrowers from misleading lenders

Illinois PIRG advocated for stronger protections for students over the past year, giving borrowers agency and accurate information as they repay student loans.

Last year, Illinois PIRG was a friend and ally to student borrowers across our state.

Illinois PIRG and other student and consumer advocates joined forces with then-Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan to pass the Illinois Student Loan Bill of Rights—a bipartisan piece of legislation that prevents lenders from misleading or ignoring student borrowers.

“Illinois borrowers deserve accurate information about their loans and what options they have to pay them back,” said Illinois PIRG State Director Abe Scarr.

The legislation, which went into effect at the close of 2018, aims to address widespread abuses and service failures in the student loan industry—and to return agency to Illinois residents working to repay their student loans.
Protecting consumers from dangerous products

In 2018, Illinois PIRG Education Fund and our national Consumer Watchdog team conducted independent testing and research to identify dangers that can pose risks to our health, safety or well-being; and worked hard to get dangerous products off of store shelves.

In 2018, Illinois PIRG released a series of reports by our research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund. March’s “In Your Face” report found asbestos in three different shimmery makeup products sold at Claire’s, with one containing more than 150,000 fibers of asbestos per gram of product. Asbestos is an extremely dangerous substance that can increase the risk of skin cancer and cause lung cancer, mesothelioma and even death.

Our network quickly alerted Claire’s to these test results, and asked the company to recall the items and inform customers immediately, but representatives refused. Illinois PIRG is now calling on Congress to pass legislation that will protect our kids by requiring appropriate testing and labeling of cosmetics.

Illinois PIRG also released our national network’s annual “Trouble in Toyland” report in November, identifying unsafe toys that skirted safety regulations and made it onto store shelves and internet marketplaces. Our national network and health professionals across the country held news events to alert parents and others of the dangers some toys pose to children.
Making our democracy more democratic

In 2018, Illinois PIRG worked to ensure that everyone has a voice in our elections by making voter registration easy, accurate and automatic.

More Illinois residents will now be able to make their voices heard on Election Day thanks to bipartisan efforts to institute automatic voter registration.

In August, Republican Gov. Bruce Rauner signed an automatic voter registration bill into law. Now, any time an eligible voter interacts with state agencies like the Department of Motor Vehicles, they can choose to “opt-in” to register to vote automatically.

“Our democracy works best when everyone participates, and we should do everything possible to make voting simple and accessible,” said Illinois PIRG State Director Abe Scarr. “Automatic voter registration strengthens our democracy. Not only will this law have positive benefits for Illinois residents, it also creates opportunities to pass more reforms with bipartisan support, and for other states to embrace automatic voter registration in a bipartisan fashion.”

Illinois PIRG served as the primary advocate for Just Democracy Illinois, which pushed for passage of automatic voter registration for more than two years. On behalf of our partners, we developed a legislative strategy, served as issue expert, and led negotiations with legislators and the governor’s office.
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