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, Illinois PIRG 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.

Illinois PIRG, 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.

Illinois PIRG 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 Illinois PIRG 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. In letters organized by U.S. PIRG Education Fund, attorneys general from 33 states called on Amazon, Walmart, eBay, Facebook and Craigslist to proactively put a stop to price gouging on their platforms. In April, 346 state legislators from 45 states signed a similar letter sent by U.S. PIRG Education Fund to those same companies.

Confronting our medical supply shortage

In response to ventilator supply shortages, Illinois PIRG and our national network have called on President Trump to fully utilize the Defense Production Act (DPA) and to coordinate distribution of critical medical supplies directly to affected areas. Thousands have signed our network’s petition calling on the president to use the DPA to double the amount of ventilators by mobilizing manufacturers in wartime-scale production efforts. On March 27, the president ordered General Motors to begin producing these lifesaving machines, but more needs to be done to fully meet demand.

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.

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

Our Mission

When consumers are cheated or the voices of ordinary citizens are drowned out by special interest lobbyists, Illinois PIRG 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. Illinois PIRG’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

REINING IN PEOPLES GAS

Chicago City Council issues call to rein in reckless spending by Peoples Gas

After another winter of rising utility bills, Chicago leaders have 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, support the City Council’s resolution.
“The Peoples Gas pipe replacement program is a poorly designed, bad deal for Chicago,” said Illinois PIRG State Director Abe Scarr.

“We didn’t give Peoples Gas a blank check, and we can’t afford to waste money on upgrades we don’t need, especially when we could be investing that money in cleaner, safer energy to heat our homes.”

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.

BAN ROUNDUP

EPA review insists glyphosate does not cause cancer

Despite a wealth of evidence to the contrary, the Trump administration’s Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has declared that glyphosate is not a carcinogen.

On Jan. 30, the EPA finalized its review of the main active ingredient in Monsanto’s ubiquitous weedkiller, Roundup. Despite its designation as a probable human carcinogen by the World Health Organization’s cancer research agency, the EPA reaffirmed its stance that glyphosate is not a cancer agent.

The determination is at odds with the verdicts of three U.S. juries, which have awarded hundreds of millions in damages to four plaintiffs since 2018, after determining the weedkiller to be a substantial factor in causing their cancers.

The EPA’s failure to recognize glyphosate as a probable human carcinogen likely rules out a federal ban—an action that countries including Germany and France took in 2019. To protect the health of our communities, Illinois PIRG and our national network are continuing to lead efforts to ban Roundup in states and cities, unless and until it’s proven safe.

U.S. PIRG Education Fund’s “How Safe Is Our Food?” report found that safety recalls from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for meat and poultry have increased 65 percent since 2013.

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

For more information call 1-800-841-7299 or send an email to: plannedgiving@illinoispirg.org
The Windy City is considering measures to curb the plastic waste blowing into Lake Michigan. On Jan. 15, Chicago aldermen proposed an ordinance to stop the use of foam takeout containers and cups within city limits in favor of compostable and recyclable alternatives. The ordinance, which advocates at Illinois PIRG helped to create, aims to help Chicago cut down its contribution to the more than 22 million pounds of plastic that end up in the Great Lakes every year by reducing the amount of common items we use just once before tossing.

“We want to target these single-use plastics and foam products because we use them for a very short amount of time … but then they exist in our environment and our community for centuries,” Illinois PIRG State Director Abe Scarr told WTTW Chicago.

Illinois PIRG is working with aldermen and local restaurants to pass the ordinance.

Dear Illinois PIRG 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,

Abe Scarr
State Director
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