



**CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC**

**LIVE**

**CORONAVIRUS CASES TOP 4.1 MILLION IN THE UNITED STATES**

**MSNBC**

**9:03 PM ET**

# WashPIRG



**PATRICIA KELMAR**  
HEALTH CARE PROGRAM DIRECTOR, PUBLIC INTEREST RESEARCH GROUP

## 2020 PROGRAM REPORT

# Finding common ground and making real progress

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*Dear WashPIRG 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.*



*Faye Park  
President, National Office*



February 2020: Our national network's Beyond Plastic campaign director Alex Truelove (right) and U.S. Rep. Alan Lowenthal (left) applauded the introduction of sweeping plastic waste legislation.



WashPIRG launched a campaign urging Whole Foods to eliminate unnecessary plastic packaging from its stores in November 2020.

# Working toward zero waste

With your support, our national network helped introduce the most sweeping federal plastic waste legislation to date in 2020. Meanwhile, WashPIRG launched a campaign urging Whole Foods to eliminate unnecessary single-use plastic packaging from its stores.

## Federal plastic waste legislation should serve as a blueprint for states

**AUG. 13, 2020:** If New Jersey showed us anything in November 2020 when it adopted the nation's strongest single-use plastics ban, it's that we don't have to wait for Washington, D.C., to start tackling plastic waste in our state.

Advocates with our national partner U.S. PIRG worked with then-U.S. Sen. Tom Udall (N.M.) and U.S. Rep. Alan Lowenthal (Calif.) to create a blueprint to do just that. And, in August, the legislators issued a memo to state lawmakers encouraging them to draw from the federal Break Free From Plastic Pollution Act for policies to reduce packaging waste. U.S. PIRG worked closely with the offices of Sen. Udall and Rep. Lowenthal to develop this sweeping legislation, which was introduced in February 2020.

The bill combines our best policies for reducing plastic pollution: In addition to banning certain single-use plastics, the legislation would shift more financial responsibility for recycling onto producers and establish a national bottle deposit program.

We don't need to wait for Congress. State lawmakers should look to The Break Free From Plastic Pollution Act for solutions to address plastic pollution in Washington.

## WashPIRG 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, WashPIRG 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." ■





*Matt Wellington, public health campaigns director with our national network (left), urged federal decision-makers in July 2020 to slow the spread of the coronavirus by temporarily closing non-essential businesses and to contain the virus by ramping up testing infrastructure. Matt's appearance sparked an outpouring of support from health care professionals, who joined the call for decision-makers to put public health first.*

# 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. ■



*In the fall of 2020, our national network called on Congress to send states resources needed to ramp up their COVID-19 testing efforts.*



*To discuss COVID-19 vaccination, Matt Wellington was joined by Dr. Syra Madad, infectious disease epidemiologist and fellow at Harvard’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs.*



*Grace Brombach, Consumer Watchdog associate with our national network, joined WSYX to advocate on behalf of consumers facing online price gouging on critical supplies in April 2020. Our national research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund first exposed massive price surges for hand sanitizer and masks on Amazon in March 2020.*

# 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 dangers brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, our network and our research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund responded. And, thanks to your support, we helped push a landmark law to protect Americans from surprise medical billing over the finish line.

## **2020 was a year of price surges on the world's largest online marketplace**

**JAN. 7, 2021:** In the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, Amazon shoppers have grappled with price spikes for items they need. Analysis by our national research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund found that the problem persisted over the course of 2020. The research revealed that hundreds of listings for essential items saw price increases of more than 20 percent between January 2020 and January 2021. Of those items, approximately 1 in 7 was sold directly by Amazon.

U.S. PIRG Education Fund exposed massive price surges for hand sanitizer and masks on Amazon in March 2020. Since then, more than 380,000 supporters have joined WashPIRG and our national network in calling on Amazon to install controls on its platform to prevent sellers from price gouging.

In March 2020, 33 attorneys general issued letters to Amazon, Craigslist, eBay, Facebook and Walmart, urging the marketplaces to adopt more proactive measures to combat price gouging, citing U.S. PIRG Education Fund's report. Shortly after, hundreds of state lawmakers signed onto a letter penned by U.S. PIRG Education Fund reinforcing that call.



## 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. ■



Patricia Kelmar advocated for the passage of an Ohio bill to stop surprise medical billing in an interview with *In Focus*, aired on Spectrum News 1, in November 2020.



During the summer of 2020, nursing homes nationwide experienced severe shortages of PPE, found a U.S. PIRG Education Fund report.



## RIGHT TO REPAIR

GROUP'S PUSH TO FIX BROKEN MEDICAL DEVICES WITHOUT MA

*Nathan Proctor, Right to Repair campaign director with our national network, called for the release of ventilator repair documentation and service keys on Pittsburgh's Action News 4 in April 2020.*



*Nathan testified in support of Right to Repair legislation at the Massachusetts state house in October 2019.*

# Right to Repair: not taking 'broken' for an answer

Our Right to Repair campaign took on new dimensions in response to the coronavirus pandemic, as medical repair professionals faced repair restrictions in the midst of a public health crisis.

With your support, WashPIRG and our national network spearheaded a call for manufacturers to release ventilator service information necessary for fixing these lifesaving machines. After major manufacturers agreed to loosen repair restrictions, we expanded our campaign, building support for federal legislation to make it easier for medical repair professionals to access the parts and service information they need to fix critical equipment.

In addition, our network's work to empower consumers and third-party repair professionals with the right to repair was recognized by business magazine Fast Company.

### **WashPIRG helps win release of vital service information for ventilators**

**APRIL 22, 2020:** In March 2020, as cases of COVID-19 mounted, it became vitally important that hospitals be able to keep ventilators in service as much as possible. But some manufacturers had restricted access to the repair documentation and service keys that biomedical repair technicians need to fix and maintain these lifesaving devices, prompting action from WashPIRG and our national network.

More than 43,000 petition signers and state treasurers and auditors from nine states joined our network's call for manufacturers to help hospitals confront the pandemic by releasing ventilator service informa-



tion. And in April, manufacturers including GE, Medtronic and Fisher & Paykel started to make that requested service information available.

“I want to thank ventilator manufacturers for providing access to service documents,” said Nathan Proctor, our national network’s Right to Repair campaign director. “We hope this also serves as an example of how restricting repair is harmful. When technicians can’t access service manuals, it creates unnecessary barriers to fixing lifesaving equipment.”

### WashPIRG backs bill in Congress to loosen medical repair restrictions

**AUG. 24, 2020:** Not being able to fix a critical medical device creates a risk for patients, especially during a pandemic. Too often, though, manufacturer restrictions impede repairs.

That’s why WashPIRG called on Congress to pass a bill introduced by U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden (Ore.) and U.S. Rep. Yvette Clarke (N.Y.), which seeks to lower restrictions on components and service information that biomedical repair technicians (biomed) need to fix essential medical devices during the COVID-19 crisis.

“I’ve talked to more than a hundred biomed since the start of the crisis,” said Kevin O’Reilly, Right to Repair associate with our national net-

work. “All they want is to be able to fix broken equipment and protect patients.”

In a July 2020 survey of 222 repair professionals released by our national research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund, 30 percent reported having critical equipment—such as defibrillators, ventilators and anesthesia machines—that they could not put to use because they lacked access to parts and service information.

### 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 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. ■



Clockwise from top left: Medical repair professionals Maggie Berkey, Travis Reilly, James Helton and Jonathan Lee urged passage of the Critical Medical Infrastructure Right-to-Repair Act in August.

Too often, consumers and third-party repair shops are unable to access the parts and service information needed to fix devices such as cell phones due to manufacturer restrictions.

## WashPIRG

Washington Public Interest Research Group  
Membership Services Office  
1402 Third Ave., Ste. 618  
Seattle, WA 98101  
(206) 568-2854

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# 2020 PROGRAM REPORT

## Member Spotlight

Our work is made possible by the support of you, our members. This year we're highlighting the story of one of our national network's members, in her own words.

### Clare Feinson

*As a child, I was often involved in causes I cared about. I collected money for UNICEF at Halloween and I was always up for service projects through the Girl Scouts. My parents were active in political and volunteer organizations and involved me in mailing newsletters, organizing events, leafleting and getting petitions signed.*

*My involvement with PIRG started when I was a graduate student at George Washington University, where I served as the chair of D.C. PIRG for a year. I think your organization has done a great job selecting issues where the public interest needs an advocate. Though I have not been involved in the day-to-day workings of PIRG for a long time, I continue to support the work that you do.*

## Our Staff (partial list)

### Faye Park

President, U.S. PIRG

### Ed Mierzwinski

Senior Director, Federal Consumer Program

### Teresa Murray

Consumer Watchdog

### Alex Truelove

Director, Zero Waste Campaign

### Matt Wellington

Director, Public Health Campaigns

### Patricia Kelmar

Director, Health Care Campaigns

### Nathan Proctor

Director, Campaign for the Right to Repair

### Danielle Melgar

Make It Toxic Free Campaign, Advocate

### Matt Casale

Director, Environment Campaigns

### Allison Cairo

Vice President and National Field Director

### Susan Rakov

Director, Research & Reports

### Jenny Douglass

Member Retention Coordinator

### Pam Clough

Director, Donor Development Program

# WashPIRG

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