



Ramping up COVID-19 testing is the key to making us safer

Matt Wellington, director of our national network's public health campaigns

As we braced for the winter—and for a new set of challenges in keeping ourselves and our loved ones safe from COVID-19—the coronavirus spread uncontrolled across much of the country, killing hundreds of Americans every day.

Our national network called on leaders to reduce caseloads by making the painful choice to shut down where and when the virus was spreading out of control. But to keep the virus contained, and to ensure safe reopening, we also needed dramatically more testing.

Washington and most other states were not hitting the COVID-19 testing targets needed to “suppress” the virus—to catch isolated cases before they turn into outbreaks.

But, instead of centrally coordinating a ramp-up of testing for all states, the federal government mostly continued to leave states in the lurch.

In response, WashPIRG and our national network launched our Test More, Save Lives campaign, calling on governors across the country to commit to hitting the testing benchmarks required to protect public health.

What level of testing do we need in order to suppress COVID-19?

The Brown University School of Public Health and Harvard Global Health Institute have built a model that projects how much testing each state needs to effectively suppress the virus. Our national network is calling on governors to commit to meeting and maintaining testing targets for their states based on this model.

MEMBER RESOURCES

Read the latest news and sign up for email alerts on our public health and consumer campaigns at: <https://washpirg.org>

WashPIRG's Mission

When consumers are cheated or the voices of ordinary citizens are drowned out by special interest lobbyists, WashPIRG 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. WashPIRG's mission is to deliver persistent, results-oriented public interest activism that protects consumers, encourages a fair, sustainable economy, and fosters responsive, democratic government.

Ensuring that each of us can access necessary testing infrastructure requires states to:

- Expand testing locations to include a variety of options such as drive-thru and walk-up sites, as well as mobile testing units that visit at-risk settings such as churches and urban neighborhoods.
- Make sure anyone who needs a test gets one, regardless of whether they have symptoms.
- Ensure all test results come back within 48 hours.
- Launch educational campaigns to inform people of where they can get tested and how.
- Target testing efforts at high-risk settings such as nursing homes, meat-packing factories, schools and prisons.
- Increase purchasing power by forming consortiums, similar to the one started by Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan and the National Governors Association.

More testing will help us save lives

As we acknowledge the tragedy of hundreds of thousands of American deaths, we reflect on our response to the pandemic and on how many of these deaths could have been avoided had we responded as quickly and as effectively as other similarly wealthy countries.

But we can't let the mistakes of the past dictate how we respond to this crisis today. It's as important as ever that we all keep social distancing, wearing masks, and limiting gatherings and non-essential travel. But adding more testing to the equation is a key to getting this virus under control and preventing widespread community outbreaks—and that's why it's imperative that Gov. Jay Inslee increase testing. ■

NEWS BRIEFS

RIGHT TO REPAIR

WashPIRG backs bill in Congress to loosen medical repair restrictions

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.

WashPIRG is calling on Congress to pass a bill introduced by U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden (Ore.) and Rep. Yvette Clark (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 network. "All they want is to be able to fix broken equipment and protect the patients in their hospitals."

In a survey of 222 repair professionals released by our national research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund in July, 30 percent reported having critical equipment—such as defibrillators, ventilators and anesthesia machines—that they



Sydney Riess, public health campaign associate with our national network (top left), virtually joined Florida residents who have lost loved ones to COVID-19 in October to call on Gov. Ron DeSantis to adopt a statewide mask mandate and to increase testing and contact tracing.

How can we expand testing in my state?

To contain the spread of the coronavirus, states must hit their testing benchmarks. The few states that met their targets, such as New York, used tried-and-tested strategies that other states can replicate.

New York residents can get a test with or without symptoms. You don't need a test order from a healthcare provider, and there are several testing sites across the state. Rather than just using testing as a tool to contain big outbreaks after they happen, New York's infrastructure—combined with clear communication of public health protocols from local and state leaders—allows it to prevent isolated infections from spreading.

could not put to use because they lacked access to parts and service information. ■

CONSUMER DEFENSE

Auto lending complaints spiked with pandemic, finds analysis of CFPB data

Americans already struggling in a pandemic shouldn't also be the targets of abusive auto lending tactics.

But from March to July 2020, Americans filed more than 2,800 complaints with the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) regarding vehicle loans and leases, according to an October report from our national research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund and Frontier Group.

The spike represents the largest influx of auto lending complaints in a five-month period in the history of the CFPB's complaint database. Nearly half cite harassment from debt collectors.

"While so many Americans have endured life-changing events in the past months and have a lot less money, auto loan market abuses that have been growing since the 2008 financial collapse have dramatically worsened," said Ed Mierzewski, senior director of U.S. PIRG Education Fund's federal consumer programs.

The report makes recommendations to the CFPB, the Federal Trade Commission and state decision-makers for protecting consumers in the auto lending market. ■

BEYOND PLASTIC

Federal plastic waste legislation should serve as a blueprint for states

If New Jersey showed us anything in November 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 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 congressmen issued a memo to state lawmakers encouraging them to draw from the federal



Scripps National News

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 would establish a national bottle deposit program.

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

Lucy Baker, consumer program associate with our national network, discusses the sharp increase in auto loan complaints in an interview with Scripps National News.

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TOP STORY: Ramping up COVID-19 testing is the key to making us safer

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ZERO OUT TOXICS

Testing suggests PFAS in food packaging at McDonald's

Some food packaging at popular restaurant chains—including McDonald's Big Mac container—may contain toxic PFAS chemicals, found a report co-released by Illinois PIRG Education Fund, the Mind the Store campaign, Toxic-Free Future and other coalition partners.

Nicknamed “forever chemicals” for their persistence in the human body and environment, PFAS (or per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances) have been linked to health problems including cancer, liver damage and decreased fertility. Paper bags used for greasy foods and molded fiber bowls and trays were among the items that most frequently tested above the fluorine screening level suggesting they were treated with PFAS.



“Is it really worth risking our health so our hands don't get greasy?” asks Danielle Melgar, toxics advocate with Illinois PIRG Education Fund.

“We shouldn't have to worry that our lunch is exposing us to toxic chemicals,” said Danielle Melgar, toxics advocate for Illinois PIRG Education Fund.

WashPIRG is calling on McDonald's to use only PFAS-free packaging. ■

THANKS TO YOU



Dear WashPIRG member,

If the past year has taught us anything, it's that our problems don't come one at a time. Thanks to your support, we're working to ramp up COVID-19 testing, cut down plastic waste, and get toxic chemicals out of our everyday lives. Thank you for making it all possible.

Thank you,

Faye Park
President, National Office
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