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, WISPIRG 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.

WISPIRG, 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.

WISPIRG 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 WISPIRG 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, WISPIRG 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, WISPIRG 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.

WISPIRG’s Mission

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

WISPIRG’s mission is to deliver persistent, results-oriented public interest activism that protects consumers, encourages a fair, sustainable economy, and fosters responsive, democratic government.

PIRG CONSUMER WATCHDOG

Emergency anti-price gouging law takes effect for first time in Wisconsin history

Wisconsin is protecting consumers from price gouging during the ongoing coronavirus crisis through a state law that has been triggered for the first time ever.

By declaring a public health emergency on March 12, Gov. Tony Evers automatically enacted a 15-year-old statute that prohibits retailers from raising their pre-emergency prices by more than 15 percent. Price gouging has increasingly become a problem since the start of the crisis, as shown by analysis from our research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund and WISPIRG Foundation. Our national network has been urging retailers to be more proactive in preventing predatory behavior toward consumers.
“We found a four-pack of Purell hand sanitizer that sold for about $160,” WISPIRG Foundation State Director Peter Skopec told Wisconsin’s Fox6 News. “We’re calling on companies such as Amazon to institute stronger price gouging policies.”

Since the statute was triggered, the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection has issued cease-and-desist orders to several companies, including Walmart and Menards.

**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.

**TRANSFORM TRANSPORTATION**

*Wisconsin can do better on when it comes to transportation*

When the Wisconsin Department of Transportation announced the recipients of a $75 million grant program in March, we called it a big missed opportunity. The awards included plenty of funding for road repairs and expansions, while only one of the 11 public transit project applications that were submitted will receive funding. Fortunately, the grant program also makes some investment in bike and pedestrian infrastructure.

“We need to do a better job at providing options besides cars as young people gravitate to places where they don’t need to drive, and to keep Wisconsin’s growing number of seniors mobile and active in their communities,” said WISPIRG State Director Peter Skopec. “And we know that we won’t be able to meet Wisconsin’s ambitious climate goals by continuing to widen roads and underfunding better, cleaner ways to get around.”

WISPIRG will keep working with state leaders, including the governor’s new Climate Task Force, to create clean, effective transportation options for all Wisconsinites.
THANKS TO YOU
Dear WISPIRG 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,

[Signature]
Peter Skopec
State Director
info@wispirg.org

TOP STORY: Responding to the COVID-19 crisis
The COVID-19 pandemic has forced Americans to confront harsh realities. In response to the crisis, WISPIRG has continued to work for a healthier, safer world.

BEYOND PLASTIC
New federal bill calls for U.S. to move beyond plastic

Addressing our plastic pollution problem means stemming the flow of plastic into our communities, landfills and environment.

On Feb. 11, U.S. Sen. Tom Udall and U.S. Rep. Alan Lowenthal introduced legislation that would re-envision how we handle our plastic waste. The first measure outlined in the proposed Break Free From Plastic Act is simple: make less of it. The legislation would phase out unnecessary single-use plastics, which overburden our landfills and pollute our environment. The legislation also provides funding for recycling and composting infrastructure, and would shift the financial burden of managing waste and recyclables from town and city governments to manufacturers.

“We’re inundated by plastic pollution, but we make more each year,” said Alex Truelove, our national network’s Beyond Plastic campaign director. “Finally, we have a federal bill that offers real solutions, drawing from successful ordinances across the globe.”


Addressing our plastic pollution problem means stemming the flow of plastic into our communities, landfills and environment.

On Feb. 11, U.S. Sen. Tom Udall and U.S. Rep. Alan Lowenthal introduced legislation that would re-envision how we handle our plastic waste. The first measure outlined in the proposed Break Free From Plastic Act is simple: make less of it. The legislation would phase out unnecessary single-use plastics, which overburden our landfills and pollute our environment. The legislation also provides funding for recycling and composting infrastructure, and would shift the financial burden of managing waste and recyclables from town and city governments to manufacturers.

“We’re inundated by plastic pollution, but we make more each year,” said Alex Truelove, our national network’s Beyond Plastic campaign director. “Finally, we have a federal bill that offers real solutions, drawing from successful ordinances across the globe.”


Printed on recycled paper