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

By Matt Wellington, director of public health campaigns with U.S. PIRG

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.

Most 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, U.S. PIRG and our state partners 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.
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 consortia, 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 our governors increase testing.

NEWS BRIEFS

RIGHT TO REPAIR

U.S. PIRG 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.

U.S. PIRG 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 (biomeds) need to fix essential medical devices during the COVID-19 crisis.

“How I’ve talked to more than a hundred biomeds since the start of the crisis,” said Kevin O’Reilly, U.S. PIRG Right to Repair associate. “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 U.S. PIRG Education Fund in July, 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.
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 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.

“We can’t stop the flow of plastic pollution unless we turn off the tap by making less disposable plastic in the first place,” said Alex True-love, U.S. PIRG Zero Waste campaign director.

“We know that plastic shopping bags and foam containers are among the most common, harmful and non-recyclable forms of plastic out there. Study after study agrees: We’re better off without them.”

U.S. PIRG and our state partners are continuing to build support for bans on the worst single-use plastics both at the federal level and in states across the country.

BEYOND PLASTIC

New Jersey takes strongest action in the nation on single-use plastics

New Jersey became a national leader on tackling plastic pollution this fall.

Gov. Phil Murphy signed a statewide ban on plastic retail bags and polystyrene foam containers—some of the most pervasive and harmful forms of single-use plastic—this past November.

The new law makes New Jersey the latest state to enact sweeping plastic waste legislation a year after Maryland and Maine became the first to ban foam takeout containers. The state additionally joins seven others that have adopted bans on plastic shopping bags since 2019.
In a win for consumers’ health, California has passed a first-in-the-nation law banning toxic chemicals in cosmetics.

Gov. Gavin Newsom signed the Toxic-Free Cosmetics Act, sponsored by our partner group CALPIRG, in September. The new law bans 24 toxic ingredients, including mercury and formaldehyde, from beauty and personal care products sold in the state.

“We applaud Gov. Newsom and the Legislature for taking decisive action to protect public health, and we are grateful to Assemblymembers Al Muratsuchi, Buffy Wicks and Bill Quirk for introducing this crucial legislation,” said CALPIRG Public Health Associate Claudia Deeg.

The banned chemicals are linked to severe health issues including cancer, birth defects, organ system damage and endocrine disruption. California’s decision to get them out of cosmetics sets an example for other states to follow.

“Thanks to you...”

Dear U.S. PIRG member,

This past year, we’re reminded that our problems don’t come one at a time. Our national network is working to ramp up COVID testing, loosen medical repair restrictions, and zero out toxic chemicals in our daily lives—and it’s all possible thanks to your support.

Thank you,

Faye Park
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