Finding common ground and making real progress

Dear ConnPIRG Member,

Given the partisan rancor in our nation, one might reasonably wonder if it’s still possible for Americans to find common ground and solve problems.

It is. And we have examples:

1. Consumers, patients, doctors and nurses from across the country came together to stop the food industry’s overuse of antibiotics, a practice that leads to antibiotic-resistant bacteria—or “superbugs”—that cut short tens of thousands of lives each year. This wasn’t about red America or blue America, it was all Americans sharing a common interest that convinced McDonald’s to commit to reducing antibiotics in its beef supply chain. (See page 3 for more.)

2. Given what we know about the potential harm some chemicals can do, it’s imperative for the public to be aware of risks, and for lawmakers, manufacturers and retailers to respond to threats to our health and our children’s health. In 2018, our Consumer Watchdog team conducted independent research to identify and eliminate some of the most dangerous products. (See page 5.)

3. A bipartisan majority in the last Congress approved a law allowing consumers to freeze their personal credit reports for free—the simplest and most effective step we can take to prevent identity theft. (See page 7 for how our Consumer Watchdog team made it easier for consumers to protect themselves.)

Many threats to our health and safety cut across political divides. When we get beyond the filter bubbles that inhibit real dialogue in Washington, D.C., and on social media, we can find support for solutions to these problems and others like them.

Your support for ConnPIRG is helping to bring people together and find answers for a healthier, cleaner, safer and more secure future for all Americans. Thank you.

Sincerely,

David Rossini
Acting Director, ConnPIRG
Defending consumer protections

We should be able to save, invest and manage our money without fear of being tricked, trapped or otherwise ripped off by the banks or institutions we trust with our financial future. That’s why it’s so important that we protect the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB).

After the Great Recession, ConnPIRG and our national network were instrumental in helping establish the CFPB—a watchdog agency devoted to creating and enforcing fair, clear and transparent rules to protect consumers. But the Trump administration is pushing to weaken or even get rid of it.

**Keeping the Consumer Bureau intact**
The CFPB holds big banks, debt collectors, lenders and others accountable if they try to take advantage of consumers. Our national network helped spearhead the creation of the Consumer Bureau. Now, we’re standing up for consumer protection once again.

Last year, we reached out to people across the country about the urgent threats to our financial wellbeing, and about the great work the Consumer Bureau is doing on our behalf. We gathered thousands of petition signatures, sent emails and made phone calls to Congress to show our support for the CFPB.

**Strengthening consumer protections in states**
State attorneys general have expressed concern about the CFPB’s new leadership, and several have promised to double down on efforts to enforce consumer protection laws at the state and federal levels.

In December, our research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund released “Positioned to Protect,” the third in a series of reports detailing the role of the CFPB in protecting consumers and highlighting how states can strengthen consumer protections. Some attorneys general have established agencies similar to the CFPB at the state level. A number of local governments have implemented new education and enforcement programs, and the Cities for Financial Empowerment Fund is helping develop new projects to ensure that citizens are protected in the marketplace.

ConnPIRG and our national network are advocating for state and local governments to take charge of policing financial markets when the CFPB can’t provide adequate protections, and providing consumers with tools they can use to protect themselves.
Stopping the misuse of life-saving antibiotics

Because of your support this past year, ConnPIRG and our national network were able to help reduce the overuse of antibiotics on factory farms.

The overuse and misuse of antibiotics in humans, animals and agriculture is creating “superbugs” that are resistant to treatment. The World Health Organization has named antibiotic resistance one of the top 10 global threats to human health. According to an estimate from researchers at Washington University School of Medicine, as many as 162,000 people die from multidrug-resistant infections annually in the U.S., making these infections the third leading cause of death.

ConnPIRG and our national network have gathered support from activists, corporate actors and health professionals across the country to address the looming dangers of antibiotic resistance. A group of physicians and health experts, The Health Professional Action Network, is ready to be our voice in the media, in state capitols, and wherever we need to counter misleading claims or advocate for new solutions.

In honor of World Antibiotics Awareness Week in November, our national network partner, U.S. PIRG Education Fund, featured seven infectious disease physicians, specialists, scholars and pediatricians from our Health Professionals Action Network in an eight-part video series. These champions of medicine joined staff to discuss antibiotic resistance and the need to reduce antibiotic use in human and veterinary medicine.
On Nov. 15, U.S. PIRG Education Fund joined a group of panelists at Harvard University to discuss the future of antibiotics. Speakers presented solutions such as stopping the routine use of antibiotics on factory farms, investing more time and money into developing new antibiotics, and implementing legislation that curbs the overuse of antibiotics.

**Setting off a chain reaction**

In October, ConnPIRG released our national network’s “Chain Reaction IV” report grading the top 25 U.S. burger chains on their antibiotics policies. Most, including McDonald’s, received failing grades. BurgerFi and Shake Shack were the only two chains to earn “A” grades for sourcing beef raised without routine antibiotics.

The routine use of antibiotics in livestock significantly contributes to the spread of antibiotic resistance. In fact, nearly two-thirds of the medically important antibiotics sold in the U.S. are intended for use in livestock and poultry operations.

Fast food restaurants, as one of the largest markets for meat in the U.S., can play an instrumental role in pushing producers to use antibiotics responsibly if they commit to only purchasing beef raised without routine antibiotics.

Throughout 2018, ConnPIRG and our national network called on McDonald’s to use its influence to take action that could spark an industry-wide shift toward curbing the overuse of antibiotics in the meat industry. Today, we’re pleased to inform you that McDonald’s made a commitment to do just that.

**McDonald’s made a commitment**

Antibiotics vital to human medicine are routinely given to animals to help them survive crowded, stressful and unsanitary conditions, regardless of whether the animals are actually sick, threatening the efficacy of our life-saving medications. That’s why ConnPIRG and our national network have been calling on fast food chains such as McDonald’s to phase routine antibiotics out of their beef supply chains.

And in December, McDonald’s showed us it was listening. The company committed to monitor and set reduction targets for antibiotic use in its global beef supply chain by the end of 2020. Whether you eat at McDonald’s or not, this is a huge victory for public health.

“The Golden Arches just raised the bar for responsible antibiotic use in meat production. We can’t afford to misuse these precious medicines. Otherwise, we risk losing our ability to treat life-threatening infections,” said Matt Wellington, director of our national network’s Stop the Overuse of Antibiotics campaign. “McDonald’s new commitment is a promising step forward that will help preserve antibiotics for the future, and that’s something we should all be happy about.”
Protecting consumers from dangerous products

In 2018, ConnPIRG Education Fund and our national Consumer Watchdog team conducted independent testing and research to identify dangers that can pose risks to our health, safety or well-being; and worked hard to get dangerous products off of store shelves.

There are more than 80,000 chemicals on the U.S. market, many of which were never tested for their health impacts. In the absence of government action on some of these products, retailers are stepping up to protect consumers.

Last year, 31-year-old Drew Wynne, the proud owner of a cold brew coffee business, died from toxic fumes while properly using a methylene chloride-based paint stripper. After hearing Drew’s story in May, ConnPIRG Education Fund joined a coalition in an effort to get dangerous paint strippers off store shelves.

Along with our coalition partners, we sent Lowe’s more than 7,000 petition signatures, urging the company to drop these deadly products. Lowe’s listened, announcing it would do so by the end of 2018. Next, we shifted our attention to Home Depot and Walmart. After receiving thousands of comments from our network, both retailers announced plans to phase out these paint strippers.
Toxics in kids’ products
In 2018, ConnPIRG released a series of reports by our research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund. March’s “In Your Face” report found asbestos in three different shimmery makeup products sold at Claire’s, with one containing more than 150,000 fibers of asbestos per gram of product. Asbestos is an extremely dangerous substance that can increase the risk of skin cancer and cause lung cancer, mesothelioma and even death.

Our network quickly alerted Claire’s to these test results, and asked the company to recall the items and inform customers immediately, but representatives refused. ConnPIRG is now calling on Congress to pass legislation that will protect our kids by requiring appropriate testing and labeling of cosmetics.

After testing dozens of markers, crayons, binders and more, our research partners found some common school supplies containing asbestos lead or other dangerous substances. Released on Aug. 7, the “Safer School Supplies Shopping Guide” warned consumers about the toxic products we found, and offered suggestions for safer alternatives.

ConnPIRG released our national network’s annual “Trouble in Toyland” report in November, identifying unsafe toys that skirted safety regulations and made it onto store shelves and internet marketplaces. Our national network and health professionals across the country held news events to alert parents and others of the dangers some toys pose to children.

Stay up to date on the latest threats to consumers with the PIRG Consumer Watchdog. Sign up for consumer alerts at www.connpirg.org.
Protecting consumers from data security threats

From warning of data breaches to preventing credit fraud to protecting consumers from identity theft, ConnPIRG and our national network are here to help you keep your data safe and secure.

More than one year after announcing the biggest data breach in history, Equifax still hasn’t been held accountable or provided the information and tools consumers need to adequately protect themselves. The breach exposed 148 million consumers’ social security numbers and birthdates, and for some people, credit card numbers and driver’s license numbers, putting them at increased risk of identity theft. That’s why our network stepped in.

On Sept. 7—the anniversary of the public announcement of the Equifax data breach—ConnPIRG released our national network’s report detailing the government’s failure to hold the company accountable and offering tips for consumers to protect themselves. The report also concludes that both oversight and financial consequences are needed to prevent future large-scale breaches.

“We’ve put together tips for preventing, detecting and resolving different types of identity theft and fraud, all in one place,” said Mike Litt, member of U.S. PIRG Education Fund’s national Consumer Watchdog team.
A major victory for data security
The best way to protect yourself against the Equifax breach and similar data security threats got a little easier in 2018. ConnPIRG and our national network helped pass a bipartisan law requiring credit bureaus to offer free credit freezes—a vital protection against identity theft.

We recommend that everyone freeze their credit with all three major credit bureaus, Equifax, Experian and TransUnion. You should check your credit card statements regularly for fraudulent charges and set up an online Social Security account.

“It’s about time the credit bureaus stopped charging us for the right to control our own information. We didn’t give them permission to collect or sell our information in the first place,” said Mike Litt, member of our national Consumer Watchdog team.

If you freeze your credit, the credit reporting bureaus can’t share your information with new lenders unless you first thaw the freeze—making it more difficult for criminals to open a fraudulent account in your name.
2018 PROGRAM REPORT

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