

Illinois PIRG

Standing Up To Powerful Interests

Illinois Public Interest Research Group
Citizen Agenda: An Update For Members Of Illinois PIRG

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Find links to resources and actions at www.illinoispirg.org/newsletters

Consumer Protection

Victory! Product Safety Bill Now Law

The Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act, signed into law on Aug. 14, is the largest overhaul in the history of the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), which was established in 1973. It will help make products around the country safer—far less likely to trigger the massive recalls we saw a year ago and, more importantly, far less likely to cause harm to children.

The concentrated, last-minute efforts of Illinois PIRG members, consumers and public interest and scientific groups helped push the measure over the top. In the days leading up to the final vote, more than 7,000 PIRG members sent letters, signed petitions or made phone calls in support. Despite heavy resistance from powerful interests including ExxonMobil, the National Association of Manufacturers and the American Chemistry Council, we were able to secure this important victory.

Heading Off The Recalls

To address the slew of dangerous products that have recently slipped through the cracks, the comprehensive bill will ban lead and six kinds of phthalates (a class of toxic chemicals) in children's products, and require third-party testing and certification for products going to children age 12 or under.

The bill will also provide much-needed resources for the safety commission, allowing it to remove hazardous products more quickly, hand out fines and penalties to

those violating product safety laws, and create a public database so that consumers and the media can learn about potentially hazardous products.

"Protecting our children from dangerous products is always a good idea, but now it's the law," said Consumer Program Director Ed Mierzwinski. "We look forward to working with a stronger CPSC with more tools at its disposal." ■

Outsourcing Accountability

A Victory To Rein In Federal Contractors

After media reports confirmed that Kellogg, Brown and Root and several other private contractors had set up sham companies in tax havens like the Cayman Islands to avoid paying millions in taxes, Illinois PIRG took action. And, this spring, we scored a major victory for the public, by making sure tax-dodging private contractors are held accountable. The HEART Act rewards members of the military for their service and pays for it by stopping tax gimmicks from some of the government's largest private contractors.

Together with U.S. PIRG, our national federation, we organized a



KIDS PROTECTED—Nancy Pelosi signs the Illinois PIRG-supported product safety bill and sends it to the president. Now that the bill is law, lead is banned from all children's products.

Member Resource

PRODUCT SAFETY
Read more about the victory. [Visit the Web site of U.S. PIRG, our national federation: www.uspirg.org/issues/product-safety.](http://www.uspirg.org/issues/product-safety)



Curbing High Gas Prices Stimulus Rebate Report Shows Need For Transit

Without sufficient alternatives to driving, the average American family has spent their entire economic stimulus check at the gas pump. According to "Squandering the

to communities that need it and make it easier for people to drive less," said Emily Miller, Illinois PIRG advocate. "Meanwhile, transit agencies have struggled to keep up with increased ridership. Despite the success of new rail routes and bus lines around the country, new transit projects, like the red line expansion, have remained stuck on the drawing board due to lack of funding." ■

"The City Council endorsement is critical in our campaign to win reform of our transportation system," said Illinois PIRG's Brian Imus. "By providing more transportation options for Illinoisans, we can become less dependent on oil, reduce global warming pollution and help consumers save money." ■



Erin Wingo

INCREASED FUNDING FOR PUBLIC TRANSIT—Illinois PIRG's John Krieger, with the support of members nationwide, lobbied for an increase in funding for public transportation.

Transit Not Traffic Building Support For Transportation Reform

On July 30, the Chicago City Council voted unanimously to endorse a resolution in support of 21st Century Transportation for America. The resolution, written by Illinois PIRG's Brian Imus and introduced by Alderman Joe Moore, is based on Illinois PIRG's transportation reform platform, which has been signed by more than a dozen other state and local leaders.

The pledge is part of an effort to build support for a new transportation future in America: to fix and maintain our roads and bridges, increase funding for transit infrastructure and reform the way we spend tax dollars for transportation.

In addition to the resolution passed by the Chicago City Council, Illinois PIRG's transportation pledge has been signed by several civic groups and state lawmakers, including State Rep. Julie Hamos, chair of the House Mass Transit Committee.

New Voters Project

Engaging Young Voters: 650,000 Voters Reached

On more than 100 campuses across the country, New Voters Project organizers are working to train thousands of students to help turn out hundreds of thousands of young, first-time voters to polls on Election Day.

The effort underway represents the largest effort undertaken by the student PIRG's New Voters Project, of which Illinois PIRG is a part.

"The more people that vote, the better," said the New Voters Project's Sujatha Jahagirdar. "Until recently, young voters had some of the worst turnout of any demographic. And since we know that voting is a habit most learn young, we need to turn that around if we want a strong democracy."

The New Voters Project peer recruitment model has been perfected over the last several elections. It relies on training student volunteers to recruit their friends to register and commit to voting.

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Member Resource

TRANSIT

Read "Squandering the Stimulus," our report revealing that American families spent their entire economic stimulus check on high-priced gas. [Download the report at www.illinoispirg.org/report.](http://www.illinoispirg.org/report)



Stimulus," a new report from Illinois PIRG, since President Bush signed the tax rebates into law in February, the average household has spent more than \$1,500 filling their tanks.

"Here in metropolitan Chicago, residents of transit-rich communities like Evanston are able to keep their annual gas costs below \$1,490 per year, while residents in communities with less access to transit—Hoffman Estates, for example—are spending more than \$4,500 per year," said Scott Bernstein, Center for Neighborhood Technology president.

To address the long-term impact high gas prices are having on consumers, Illinois PIRG is working with federal and state lawmakers to improve and expand transit options and ensure accountability for how tax dollars are spent on transportation projects.

"With adequate capital funding from lawmakers, we can invest in our transit network, expand service

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Health Care Reform For Illinois: The Fight Continues

In the past six years, health insurance premiums across the country have increased more than 68 percent, while the average income has risen by only 13 percent. It's no wonder most Americans are dissatisfied with the high cost of health care.

Unfortunately, even as prices rise, consumers still do not have access to information about how insurance companies spend their premiums. Without adequate transparency, companies are not held accountable and consumers can't make informed decisions.

Transparency In Reporting

To address this problem, Illinois PIRG and our allies crafted House Bill 5865, the Premium and Loss Data Reporting Act. The bill, sponsored by State Rep. Mary Flowers, would protect consumers by requiring insurance companies to report how much of each premium dollar goes toward health care, and how much goes to industry profit and administrative costs.

While the industry does report data quarterly to its stockholders, the bill would require a one-page report to be filed with the Illinois Department of Insurance.

HB 5865 would provide the information needed to determine whether higher premiums are actually the result of rising health care costs or simply a means to increase industry profits.

Working In Coalition

Led by Illinois PIRG's Emily Miller, a coalition of more than 10 organizations rallied to build the support to push the bill through the state Legislature. Coalition members include the AARP, AIDS Foundation of Chicago, Campaign for Better Health Care, the Illinois League of Women Voters and Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law. With the support of coalition members, as well as lead sponsor Rep. Flowers and 27 co-spon-

sors, the bill passed through the Illinois House.

Bill Falls Victim To Gridlock

Despite its success in the House, grassroots support wasn't enough to counter insurance industry opposition to any measure that would increase accountability and transparency for consumers.

The bill also became the victim of political gridlock that prevented even a vote in the State Senate. Political maneuvering and in-fighting between Gov. Rod Blagojevich, House Speaker Michael Madigan and Senate President Emil Jones has caused numerous public inter-



National Institutes of Health

PROTECTING CONSUMERS—An Illinois PIRG-backed bill would require insurance companies to report spending to determine if higher premiums are the result of rising costs or a means of increasing industry profit.

est policies from moving forward in Springfield.

Despite the setback, Illinois PIRG will continue to build grassroots support for common-sense health care reform that will hold insurance companies accountable to the customers they serve. ■

From The Director



Dear Illinois PIRG member,

I like to think of myself as someone who sees the glass half full. With Illinois politics the way they are, I find that rosy outlook hard to maintain, particularly with a steady drumbeat of news stories of corruption, graft and gridlock.

Political gridlock in the state Legislature has left problems like health care access and high gas prices unaddressed. Our bill to create greater transparency in the health care insurance industry fell victim to that gridlock.

A new election helps. Regardless of who wins or loses, it's an opportunity to hold politicians accountable to their campaign promises. This election season brought lots of promises, including calls to reform the health care industry to make it more affordable and accessible to all Illinoisans.

Because health care was such a high profile issue, I'm optimistic we can use those promises to get something done in the upcoming legislative session.

It won't be easy, of course. It will take support from citizens across the state to remind politicians of their promises. It will take careful research and direct lobbying to show lawmakers that our public policy recommendations are good for Illinois and have broad support among their constituents.

And thanks to your support, that's exactly what we're gearing up to do.

Sincerely,

Brian Imus
State Director
brian@illinoispirg.org

Illinois PIRG Citizen Agenda

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Victory: Product Safety Bill Is Law



Gas Prices Make Case For Transit



Gridlock Stalls Health Insurance Reform

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New Voters Project

Engaging Young Voters

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A University of Michigan study found that those who received a reminder in a text message one day before an election were 4.2 percent more likely to vote. That's why leading up to Election Day, New Voters Project organizers and volunteers will help send hundreds of thousands of text messages, to remind their peers to hit the polls.

When the state PIRGs' New Voters Project began in late 2003, its goal was to invigorate democracy with the voices of young people—who have been traditionally infrequent voters—and to get prominent politicians to address the concerns facing the next generation.

Until recently, the numbers of college-age Americans who registered and voted were declining with each new election. In 2004, however, young voters bucked the trend, catching many political observers by surprise.

In 2006, the trend continued, even in a mid-term election. According to Youth Voter



YOUNG VOTERS GET ACTIVE—New Voters Project organizers have registered more than 650,000 young voters in the past three election cycles, including 75,000 students in the 2006 election alone.

Strategies, "Turnout in the 2006 election more than doubled in the 36 precincts where groups like the New Voters Project actively turned out this age cohort." In that election, New Voters Project organizers tuned out more than 75,000 students to vote and ran operations on 80 campuses.

Over the years, the New Voters Project has helped to register an estimated 650,000 18- to 24-year-old voters, bringing new energy to the political process. ■

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Illinois PIRG's Mission

Illinois PIRG is an advocate for the public interest. When consumers are cheated, or when the voices of ordinary citizens are drowned out by special interest lobbyists, Illinois PIRG 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.

Illinois PIRG Citizen Agenda Credits:

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