

SPECIAL EDITION



Health care workers need personal protective equipment (PPE) to keep themselves safe. A centralized, transparent system for sourcing and distributing medical supplies would help make sure PPE gets to the areas that need it most. Credit: lev radin via Shutterstock.

How can we protect patients if we don't protect health care workers?

By Matt Wellington, director of public health campaigns with our national network

Four months into the COVID-19 pandemic, health professionals in many parts of the country still didn't have the personal protective equipment (PPE) needed to keep themselves safe while they save lives.

In July, as COVID-19 hospitalizations surged in several states, the fragile supply chain for masks, gloves, gowns and other medical supplies was put under increased strain as many states continued to reopen—some even as case numbers rose—and non-health care businesses in need of PPE increased demand even further.

Early in the pandemic, an insatiable demand for PPE far outstripped a limited supply. Many stakeholders agree that the supply has increased since then, but serious issues remain, including

a lack of central, transparent coordination for how those materials are distributed.

At the time of writing, states are still being forced to compete against each other and the federal government for critical medical supplies. The lengths to which state and local officials have had to go to procure the supplies they need are well documented.

We're calling for a better system

The good news is that we can fix this. At the same time that health professionals have been calling for more supplies, logistics experts have been citing the need for central coordination of the supply chain.

Our national network has mobilized local elected officials and leading medical experts around that call for central coordination. We've

COVID-19 RESPONSE EDITION

In this special issue, read the latest on what CALPIRG and our national network are doing to bolster our nation's response to the COVID-19 crisis and to stand up for consumers during this uncertain time.

given physicians a megaphone to have their voices heard and we've brought together stakeholders to share ideas and challenges for moving forward.

Previous efforts by the Trump administration to source and distribute PPE have fallen short and have focused on getting supplies to private companies rather than impacted areas. To ensure that health professionals and other frontline

Therefore, in July, a coalition of more than 50 health and medical groups petitioned U.S. senators, including Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, to include the Medical Supply Transparency and Delivery Act in the next coronavirus stimulus package, as the House did in May.

Our national network urged the inclusion of these vital measures that would serve to protect the people protecting us.

We're nowhere near out of the woods yet on COVID-19. But we can fix the mistakes that put health workers and the public at greater risk by making sure our supply chains are organized to get PPE quickly and transparently to the places that need it most. ■



Clockwise from top left: Jeremy Samuel, M.D., M.S., M.A.; U.S. Rep. Andy Kim; Julie Parsonnet, M.D.; Joe Kanter, M.D., M.P.H.; and Matt Wellington, director of our national network's public health campaigns, discuss challenges in getting supplies to health care workers in May.

workers get what they need to stay safe, the federal government needs to create a centralized system that gets medical supplies directly to impacted areas in a timely and transparent way.

The Medical Supply Transparency and Delivery Act would accomplish that. The legislation, introduced by Sens. Tammy Baldwin (Wis.) and Chris Murphy (Conn.) in April, would:

- Create a central coordinator position to oversee federal purchasing and distribution of medical supplies. This person would have the full authority to utilize the Defense Production Act in order to compel companies to produce necessary medical equipment.
- Establish transparency and accountability in handling of the medical supply chain by initiating public weekly reports of current supply stockpiles and projected needs, as well as public posting of states' requests for medical equipment and locations where supplies are distributed.

Thousands joined CALPIRG and our national network in calling on the Senate to pass these measures, which are critical for producing more personal protective equipment and allocating those materials in a transparent way. But the Senate has yet to approve the legislation at the time of writing.

NEWS BRIEFS

TAX & BUDGET

Trump administration finally shows taxpayers (some of) the receipts

Taxpayers deserve to know how their money is being spent.

But, in a blow to federal and corporate transparency, the Trump administration signaled in June that it would not disclose the names of businesses receiving more than \$500 billion in taxpayer-funded bailouts distributed through the Small Business Association's Paycheck Protection Program (PPP).

In response, CALPIRG and our national network raised the alarm in the news media and organized thousands of supporters to urge their U.S. representatives to pass legislation compelling the public release of PPP spending information.

On July 6, under pressure from Congress, the federal government released the names of companies receiving the largest loans.

"The transparency taxpayers are asking for does not require the release of Coca-Cola's secret formula," said R.J. Cross, tax & budget advocate with our national network. "We are just asking who has gotten billions of our taxpayer dollars and if that money has been spent well."

Our national network is now calling for audits of PPP loans to ensure that taxpayer money was given to businesses that qualify for the program and was spent in compliance with the program’s requirements. ■

CONSUMER PROTECTION

California lawmakers stand up against predatory price gouging

A box of disposable gloves for \$295? A five-pack of disinfecting wipes for nearly \$170?

Months into the coronavirus crisis, unscrupulous sellers were still using the pandemic to take advantage of vulnerable Californians by dramatically increasing prices of essential goods. But state lawmakers are stepping up to protect consumers and end price gouging in the Golden State.

On Aug. 31, the California Legislature passed CALPIRG-backed SB 1196, which would ensure greater protections for consumers against price gouging during an emergency. These include closing loopholes in current laws, authorizing the governor or Legislature to extend protections past the current 30-day expiration, and more.

“Californians shouldn’t be subjected to absurd prices for critical supplies during the COVID-19 crisis,” said Claudia Deeg, CALPIRG associate. “Price gouging is a scourge, and we applaud our elected officials for taking action to protect consumers now.”

As of this writing, the bill awaits Gov. Gavin Newsom’s signature. ■

PUBLIC HEALTH

Shut down, start over, do it right

On July 22, health professionals from California and across the country called on Gov. Gavin Newsom to implement stay-at-home restrictions and increase testing capacity and production of personal protective equipment in response to national surges in COVID-19 cases.

More than 1,000 health care professionals have signed our national network’s open letter to governors and President Trump emphasizing that



NBC Palm Springs

in order to contain new outbreaks of COVID-19, we need to shut down, start over and do it right. In July, experts determined California was experiencing “uncontrolled spread” of the virus.

“Our decision makers need to hit the reset button,” said CALPIRG Executive Director Emily Rusch. “Continuing on our current path will result in widespread suffering. And for what? Health experts have laid out criteria for how to reopen safely. It’s time to listen to them.”

Our national network has delivered similar letters to local, state and federal leaders, echoing the message that “reopening our economy” is not worth risking thousands of American lives to COVID-19. ■

Claudia Deeg, associate with our research partner CALPIRG Education Fund, spoke with NBC Palm Springs in April about the need to protect Californians from price gouging during the COVID-19 crisis, and about a survey by CALPIRG Education Fund that revealed excessive price spikes on online platforms.



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SPECIAL EDITION: An update on our response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Over the last few months, organizers and policy experts from across our national network have been hard at work advocating for measures to support and improve our nation's response to the coronavirus pandemic.

RIGHT TO REPAIR

Barriers to fixing medical equipment could threaten patients

When an essential medical device—such as a ventilator—breaks down, repairing it quickly could be a matter of life and death. The repair technicians who fix these lifesaving devices shouldn't be impeded by unnecessary manufacturer restrictions, especially during a pandemic.

In a July survey by U.S. PIRG Education Fund, the research arm of our national network, nearly half of medical repair professionals reported having been denied access to “critical repair information, parts or service keys” for medical equipment since March.

“Delays in getting equipment running put patients at risk,” said Nathan Proctor, our network's Right to Repair campaign director.



Leticia Reynolds, president of the Colorado Association of Biomedical Equipment Technicians, highlights how manufacturer restrictions can slow down repair.

In April, CALPIRG and our national network won the release of ventilator service information from manufacturers including GE and Fisher & Paykel. Now, we're calling on legislators to stop manufacturers from restricting repair to critical medical devices. ■

THANKS TO YOU



Dear CALPIRG member,
With your support, CALPIRG and our national network mobilized a top COVID-19 response team while continuing vital work to protect consumers, safeguard public health, transform our transportation systems and more. We couldn't do it without you.

Thank you,
Emily Rusch
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