Counterfeit drug crisis is real, global, and a major threat to consumers

According to the World Health Organization, one in every 10 medical products found in developed countries is either substandard or fake, and nearly $83 billion in counterfeit drugs are sold annually. Counterfeit drugs can be, at best, a waste of money and, at worst, fatal. To address the growing global threat of counterfeit medications, NCL has launched Fraud.org/FakeRx, a new digital education campaign for consumers.

“Counterfeit drugs are everywhere, and they are dangerous. Illicit pharmacies are pervasive on the Internet, and consumers don’t realize how common counterfeits are. Our campaign aims to provide tools and resources to spot the red flags and help consumers steer clear of illegal products,” said NCL Executive Director Sally Greenberg.

The new online action center helps visitors reduce the chances they’ll encounter counterfeit drugs, shop safely for medications online, learn to spot harmful counterfeits, and report suspicious drugs and the websites offering them to the authorities.

“Counterfeit drugs are fake or fraudulent copies of real, legitimate medicines. The World Health Organization estimates that close to $83 billion worth of counterfeit drugs are sold annually.”

NCL has worked with consumers to gather real-life stories about the risks and potential tragedy of counterfeit drugs.

“I lost my son, Jerome, a loving father of three beautiful children, to a counterfeit drug laced with fentanyl. It took one single pill to take Jerome away from us,” said Natasha Butler, whose son was one of a number of victims of counterfeit drug deaths in Sacramento, California in 2016. At the time of his death, Jerome was training to become a security guard. He was a devoted father to three children ages 10 and younger—a girl and two boys.

According to local news reports, Jerome took what he thought was a Norco pill from a trusted friend, who had found the pills in his mother’s purse. After taking what turned out to actually be a fentanyl pill, he ended up in a coma with liver and kidney failure. His family had to make the terrible decision to take him off of life support a few days later. Ultimately, charges were filed against a group of eight people for manufacturing the counterfeit Norco pills.

“We had no idea that these dangerous drugs are out there and could be the last drug someone ever takes,” said Natasha, who has taken up the cause of educating consumers about the risks of counterfeit and tainted drugs since her son’s death.

“Anyone who takes medication or fills prescriptions needs to be aware of the risks of counterfeits, and that where you get drugs is so crucial for your safety and health. Everyone should visit Fraud.org/FakeRx to learn about the risks and how to avoid being the next victim.”

Visit the new site for more stories of counterfeit drug rip-offs. NCL thanks our partners for making the new resource possible.
#NeverMoreRelevant

Dear Readers,

As you may know, 2019 has been a year of great celebration at NCL, as we marked our 120th anniversary, our rich history, and the actions, issues, and advocacy that continue to make NCL #NeverMoreRelevant today.

At our annual Trumpeter Awards Dinner in October, allies and supporters joined us in celebration of NCL’s landmark 120th anniversary and to honor the work of exceptional leaders who have devoted their careers to speaking out on behalf of consumers and workers. (See page 4 to learn more.)

Our 2019 honorees included Sara Nelson, International President of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL-CIO, known “as the new face of the labor movement.” Nelson shared the stage with former Trumpeter recipient and United Mine Workers of America President Cecil Roberts, a gifted orator, who presented Nelson’s award. Together, these two powerhouses in the labor movement represented both the legacy of a union known for winning the most difficult and bloody union struggles in U.S. labor history and the promise of the future of labor, sharing stories, laughter, and tears as they recounted emotional victories and setbacks in their struggle for worker rights.

The UMWA and the Association of Flight Attendants embrace NCL as an ally. Roberts also shared a photo of me in handcuffs, taken on a sunny day in St. Louis in May 2013, when I joined him and 6,000+ union members in protest of Patriot Coal’s bankruptcy, which threatened to leave 22,500 miners and their families without health care and retirement benefits.

Six years later, NCL continues to stand by our union brothers and sisters in support of their demands for health care, pensions, fair wages, and safe working conditions. This fall, we supported United Auto Workers’ strike against General Motors. We also called on Congress to pass the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act, which gives working people a fair shot when they join together with their coworkers to form a union and bargain for better wages, benefits, and conditions at their workplaces.

NCL is also backing the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act to protect pregnant workers, promote healthy pregnancies, and ensure economic security for pregnant women and their families.

In keeping with our dual labor-consumer mission, we launched our counterfeit drugs (see cover story) and unregulated CBD projects (see page 11). We issued new research on data breaches and the threats caused by recent vulnerabilities in computer hardware (page 3). NCL staff demanded stronger consumer protections at the federal and state levels (page 10). Our Child Labor Coalition continues to shine a spotlight on illegal child labor in cocoa production (page 9), and our LifeSmarts program celebrated a quarter-century of giving teens the consumer literacy they need to become savvy young adults—and then launched its 26th season in September (page 6).

As we celebrate our 120th year, NCL will to continue to fight tirelessly for a fair marketplace and safe workplace for all Americans. We have found inspiration in our allies in the fight, as well as in the stories of consumers and workers who have been touched by our work. Together, we will welcome the advocacy challenges and opportunities that lie ahead, and offer best wishes to you and your loved ones for a safe, healthy, and happy holiday season.

Sally Greenberg
Every October, privacy, security, and consumer advocates celebrate National Cybersecurity Awareness Month, an opportunity to remind consumers about the importance of practicing good habits online and the risks of ignoring safety concerns.

Since the first observation of National Cybersecurity Awareness Month 15 years ago, the world has gone from about 800 million Internet users to 4.5 billion. Over that same period, NCL and other watchdog groups have focused on improving cybersecurity. Our #DataInsecurity Digest, which we publish every other week, highlights the latest data breaches and policy updates.

But the proliferation of Internet users and the gathering of enormous amounts of our data by big companies means, these days, more of us are at greater risk than ever. Each of us has been affected by a hack or breach of sensitive information.

Adding to the problem is a new hardware-based vulnerability found in almost every processor in the world, which makes it increasingly difficult for consumers to have any real control over our data. While patches have been released for these design flaws, they’ve also decreased speed and performance—as much as 40 percent, according to some reports. In addition, the patch is only good until the next problem is discovered.

This fall, NCL released “Data Insecurity: How One of the Worst Computer Defects Ever Sacrificed Security for Speed,” highlighting the vulnerability and patches. The report discusses the threat these processor flaws pose to consumers—both in terms of the security of their data and slowed performance after security patches are applied.

The flaws create a tough choice for consumers: either apply each temporary “fix” and slow your device—or don’t, and put your sensitive information at risk. Consumers who apply patches remain at the mercy of companies that hold their sensitive data and are faced with a similar dilemma, particularly as they must consider the expense of implementing these fixes—including costs to add computing power lost by each patch.

“The best protection is to buy a new computer that has a CPU with hardware-level security fixes built in or is immune from the problems. Unfortunately, this is not practical for many consumers,” said John Breyault, NCL vice president of public policy, telecommunications and fraud and the report’s author. “These days, computers remain in circulation four to five years. We therefore advise consumers to perform frequent software updates.”

NCL supports several data security bills, such as the Consumer Privacy Protection Act of 2017, requiring companies to take affirmative steps to defend against cyberattacks and data breaches and to provide consumers with notice and appropriate protection when a data breach occurs.

“As we reflect on the progress made in recent decades towards a safer cyber environment for consumers, we still need to better secure our information and systems,” said Breyault. “Awareness and smart data hygiene by consumers is one part. But those mega companies who collect data must do far more to secure our information.”

To learn more, check out NCL’s new white paper at ncnet.org/spectre_meltdown.
Trumpeter Awards honor dedicated leaders, landmark NCL anniversary
This October, NCL hosted the 2019 Trumpeter Awards Dinner and Reception, honoring Sara Nelson, international president of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL-CIO with its highest honor. Bonnie Patten, executive director of Truth in Advertising, received NCL’s Florence Kelley Consumer Leadership Award for her work fighting deceptive and misleading advertising.

1. NCL Executive Director Sally Greenberg welcomes more than 300 guests to The Mayflower Hotel, in downtown Washington, DC, where they were treated to an evening of rousing speeches, the debut of a new video about NCL’s work, and the celebration of NCL’s 120th landmark anniversary.

2. Patten (left) receives the 2019 Florence Kelley Award, presented by Greenberg and the Honorable Donna Edwards, former U.S. Representative from Maryland.

3. Dinner guests view the new video featuring District of Columbia Attorney General Karl Racine (on screen), discussing how NCL’s advocacy supports the consumer protection efforts of attorneys general like him across the country.

4. United Mine Workers President (and former Trumpeter recipient) Cecil Roberts presented Nelson with this year’s Trumpeter Award and delighted guests with stories about her path to leadership within the labor community.

5. Members of NCL’s Board of Directors and Trumpeter Dinner Committee, Robyn Robbins and Pastor Herrera, Jr., thanked sponsors for their steadfast support of NCL’s work.

6. Former and current NCL staff mingle at the welcome reception.

7. NCL Vice President of Public Policy John Breyault and President Nelson.

8. Nelson shares an emotional recounting of the impact of 9/11 on flight attendants and pledges to continue to fight on behalf of workers across all sectors.

9. From left to right, NCL Director of Health Policy Patricia Kelmar, Rosa Mendoza Dávila, president of ALLvanza, and NCL Board Member Debra Berlyn.

10. CNN’s effervescent Maria Cardona returned to serve as this year’s awards dinner mistress of ceremonies.

To see more photos from this year’s event, visit NCL’s Facebook page.
LifeSmarts students answer the call and give back through community service projects

“If you want to learn something, read about it. If you want to understand something, write about it. If you want to master something, teach it.” — Yogi Bhajan

LifeSmarts began 26 years ago solely as a competition-based program, and today, NCL is very proud that it has evolved to offer much more to its participants. Nothing illustrates the program’s enhanced relevancy more than its commitment to community service.

Through LifeSmarts, high school participants have the opportunity to give back to their communities. Currently students can use Disney’s The Lion King to educate elementary school students on lessons about “going green” and safety; teach middle school students about over-the-counter medicines; and help coach older Americans to avoid becoming victims of fraud.

By committing to community service, LifeSmarts competitors are challenged to stretch their abilities, but with help from NCL every step of the way. LifeSmarts provides participants with background data, scripts that can be customized, and the educational tools needed to succeed at becoming community educators. The content students present through the community service projects also shows up in LifeSmarts competition, so the knowledge students teach others is “on the test,” and everyone wins from the experience. Here’s a look at LifeSmarts’ current community service programs:

Safety Smart

In a longstanding partnership with Underwriters Laboratories, LifeSmarts appeals to high school participants to become Safety Smart Ambassadors. More than 1,000 students have answered the call, demonstrating leadership and teaching important life lessons to younger students. In their own words, Safety Smart Ambassadors tell us just how beneficial the program is to all participants involved:

“Many times I’ve been told that young kids look up to high school students and see them as role models and influencers.

I didn’t realize how much of an impact I could make by just talking to the kids and trying to teach them the importance of being safe on the go and staying healthy and fit. Being able to make a difference has impacted me and makes me want to do more Safety Smart activities with young children in my district,” said Brooklyn Orcutt, a LifeSmarts Safety Smart Ambassador from Oklahoma.

“Safety Smart has pulled me out of my comfort zone, helping me grow in ways I never thought possible,” said Kerstin Peterson, a former Missouri competitor and a LifeSmarts Student of the Year.

“By presenting to more than 800 children in just three short months, I’ve learned how to engage children effectively in order to produce an exceptional experience for all. The relationships I formed, the skills I learned, and the experiences I’ve been a part of are all important things I take pride in. Lastly, this experience has helped me to gain the confidence necessary for public speaking and enhance my leadership skills for my future endeavors,” said Gabrielle Alcala, a student from Illinois.

The FCCLA team from Selah, Washington, after a fraud presentation to older Americans.
LifeSmarts encourages alumni to stay involved in the program, and we were excited to welcome five (who are currently in college) back to the 25th National LifeSmarts Championship in Orlando this spring. They facilitated general sessions, team and individual competitions, and spoke on an alumni panel to share what LifeSmarts has meant to them. ShuNa Xiao, a former competitor from California who returned to volunteer, wrote to us following the event. Her note illustrates the program’s goals with the LifeSmarts Alumni Association, and how important it is to stay connected to past competitors like ShuNa:

I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for this once-in-a-lifetime experience to be able to go to Orlando and participate in the LifeSmarts Competition.

As a girl who grew up in a low-income family, I never got to travel much. I would not have even dared to dream about the chance to fly across the country to Florida. Even last year when I participated in the 24th Annual Competition in San Diego, it was my first time in that city. My favorite part of the whole experience was being able to meet new people and speak to different students and coaches to see their perspectives on things. I just can’t seem to find words to describe this experience. I’ll be looking forward to seeing you soon again. I plan to go to the competition in Washington, DC as well!

If you are a LifeSmarts alumni, please connect with us! The LifeSmarts Alumni Association is active on Facebook and LinkedIn. We can help you stay in touch with other alums, look up friends and fellow competitors when you travel, or get involved in our events throughout the year.

To learn more about these community service programs, visit LifeSmarts.org.

LifeSmarts Alumni Spotlight

OTC Medicine Safety Mentors

The OTC Medicine Safety Mentoring Project was designed with LifeSmarts students in mind, and is based on educational materials produced by Scholastic and the American Association of Poison Control Centers. The project promotes safe medicine storage, safe use of OTC medicine, and an understanding of the Drug Facts Label. In the program, participating high school students instruct 5th and 6th graders about medicine safety. Johnson & Johnson has offered support for this component of the LifeSmarts program and will underwrite it again in 2020.

Students love it. The Arizona LifeSmarts team, five home-schooled high school students from Flagstaff, made a poster for the team competition (pictured at left), showcasing their OTC medicine work.

Crosby High School (Waterbury, Connecticut) teammates Samantha Martinez and Kejsi Ozuni made multiple presentations at their neighboring middle school and brought their knowledge to their annual school fair, where they asked medicine safety questions of their peers, pictured at right.

Fraud Ambassadors

LifeSmarts has partnered with Western Union to match up LifeSmarts teams with older audiences to educate them about fraud. The project has been eye-opening. The students enjoyed it, and their older American partners did, too. A pilot project is being expanded to connect more teens and older citizens.

Students told us they were startled to hear so many stories of fraud from the older audience. Many presenters told us that giving presentations and talking with older Americans made the issue of fraud much more real.

A presentation created by Samantha Martinez and Kejsi Ozuni.
Fighting child labor in cocoa: new approaches needed
Child Labor Coalition renewing efforts to remove child labor from supply chain

Thirty years ago, NCL helped established the Child Labor Coalition (CLC), which merges the resources of nearly 40 groups—including several major unions and a variety of child rights and human rights groups—that are committed to the fight to eliminate child labor.

In 2001, news broke that cocoa—the main ingredient in chocolate—was being produced, in part, by large numbers of children who were trapped in the worst forms of child labor in West Africa. An alarmed U.S. Congress responded by proposing to require labeling to help consumers purchase child-labor-free chocolate. The chocolate industry fought hard to derail the labeling system. In its place, Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) and Rep. Eliot Engel (D-NY) launched a multi-stakeholder initiative called the Harkin-Engel Protocol. Eventually, it brought together the chocolate industry, the governments of Ghana and the Ivory Coast (where 70 percent of the world’s cocoa was produced), and the U.S. Department of Labor.

Over the next decade, more than $70 million would be spent in attempts to fix cocoa’s child labor problem. Despite these efforts, a 2015 federally-funded report found that the number of child laborers in West African cocoa production had not actually declined. Recently, a series of articles in the Washington Post examined cocoa’s child labor problem, finding that efforts to certify cocoa as child labor-free were mostly unsuccessful.

The CLC and partner organizations have begun putting renewed pressure on chocolate companies to pursue new approaches in combatting the child labor problem. For starters, it’s critical that the companies pay a higher price for cocoa. Cocoa farmers make an average of only about 78 cents a day—a fraction of what is needed to attain a “living wage” and provide for their basic needs.

With farm income this low, it’s no surprise that many turn to child workers to help grow and harvest the cocoa. Meanwhile, the chocolate industry sees annual revenues beyond $100 billion. For many years, the CLC and other nonprofits have called for better prices for farmers, but the industry hid behind claims that anti-trust laws prevented them from paying a premium on market prices, and the companies instead focused on higher yields for cocoa, which we accurately predicted would lead to over-production, more children working, and, ultimately, a price crash. Earlier this year, Ghana and the Ivory Coast took joint action on the price issue, demanding a floor price: $2,600 a ton. The move would restore farmer income to levels before the price crash, but still not enough to provide a living wage.

CLC members recently met for an all-day cocoa strategy session and voted to push companies to adopt a price of $3,000 a ton—15 percent higher than the government ask. The CLC is also coordinating with partners in Europe to end child labor in the cocoa supply chain.

The CLC met with U.S. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP), which is empowered to place import holds on any goods made with forced child labor. In November, CBP barred tobacco from Malawi from entering into the United States because of forced child labor concerns. Advocates believe a similar hold by CBP would pressure chocolate companies to clean up dirty supply chains.

“The CLC will continue its efforts to force the chocolate industry to do the right thing,” said NCL’s Director of Child Labor Issues and Coordinator of the CLC Reid Maki. “We envision a day when children are not asked or forced to perform child labor in cocoa, when cocoa farmers make a living wage, and when consumers can enjoy chocolate without worrying about its true cost: the human misery that may have produced it.”
NCL health policy briefs

NCL staff taking on vital issues in public health, awareness

Fighting surprise billing

NCL has long called for consumer protection from surprise medical bills and recently joined with other consumer groups to form “No Surprises: People Against Unfair Medical Bills,” a coalition guided by the principles of banning surprise billing, containing costs of healthcare, and ensuring comprehensive protection nationwide. Congressman Frank Pallone (D-NJ), who chairs the House Energy and Commerce Committee, joined the press conference to announce the coalition, urging Congress to address this urgent consumer issue before the end of the year.

Medication safety

Every Food and Drug Administration administrator from the last two decades, no matter their party affiliation, has opposed the importation of drugs from across borders or overseas. Although importation is often touted as a way to save money, the reality is that there are no guarantees or requirements that savings will be passed along to consumers. There is, however, a chorus of law enforcement and other officials who say they cannot adequately or safely police drugs imported into the United States. NCL therefore opposed the White House announcement this summer that supported importation of drugs from outside of the United States.

“The unworkable proposal not only poses safety and purity challenges, but—without requiring any potential cost-savings to be passed on to the consumer—there are no guarantees that it will save consumers money,” said Patricia Kelmar, NCL’s director of health policy. (Meet Patricia at right.)

In September, NCL partnered with the Partnership for Safe Medicine for a Hill briefing on importation. Presentations by law enforcement experts and individuals who have lost loved ones due to counterfeit drugs emphasized the need for a secure pipeline for U.S. medication. NCL shared resources on medication adherence.

Script Your Future

NCL is gearing up for the 2020 Script Your Future Medication Adherence Team Challenge. The Team Challenge is a public health competition that convenes students of pharmacy, nursing, and medicine to raise awareness about medication adherence. Students conduct outreach in their communities and implement creative solutions to address nonadherence as a critical public health issue. NCL staff has planned exciting changes for the 2020 Team Challenge. Look for coverage of the students’ efforts in the next NCL Bulletin.

Vaccines

NCL continues to highlight vaccines as extremely safe and effective in protecting the health of all Americans. After presenting about vaccines before the U.S. Centers for Disease Control this summer, NCL attended the National Vaccine Advisory Committee public meeting to discuss our advocacy in this and other health priorities. In June, NCL’s Health Advisory Council hosted a panel of leading experts in the vaccine and child immunization space to highlight barriers and opportunities for growth in addressing vaccine-hesitant and anti-vaccine parents.

NCL recently joined members of the Adult Vaccine Access Coalition (AVAC) in a meeting with the National Quality Forum to find ways to improve quality through the use of vaccines.

Opioids misuse prevention

Working with the Alliance Against Opioid Abuse, NCL has released a toolkit for answering common questions, addressing myths, and making consumers part of the solution in the fight against opioid misuse. The tools include factsheets about prescription opioids, myths and facts, FAQs, and home disposal options.

Meet NCL’s Director of Health Policy Patricia Kelmar

Joined NCL staff: August 2019

What is your background?

I was the Senior Policy Advisor for the New Jersey Health Care Quality Institute, a multi-stakeholder nonprofit committed to improving health care quality and safety, expanding access to care, and controlling costs for employers and consumers. I also consulted with state-based nonprofit consumer advocacy groups and served as AARP New Jersey's state advocate. I started my career with the Public Interest Research Groups, which taught me the power of organizing, and then I went to George Washington University Law school to learn how to craft policy.

What drew you to NCL?

I have dedicated my career to nonprofit advocacy on behalf of consumers in the areas of health care, financial security, and consumer protection. NCL is the nation’s premier consumer advocacy organization, and its mission resonated with my desire to amplify consumer voices and continue my work to improve health care and empower patients and consumers.

What do you love about your job?

I am energized by my smart colleagues and our partners who are passionate about their role in making health care more affordable, of higher quality, and safer. It takes collaboration and creative problem solving to improve lives for others. I love the challenge.

What do you see for the future?

An empowered consumer who has a voice and the tools to take action toward living a healthy life.
Policy staff go on record for consumer protection issues
Recent testimonies before Congress, DC City Council, FTC, and NY State Public Utilities Commission

NCL public policy staff have been busy in recent months advocating on behalf of consumers on a variety of issues and before an array of committees and agencies, at both the federal and state level.

Airline advocacy
Important airline consumer protection rules mandated by Congress are being held up by industry opposition, bureaucratic inertia, and internal resistance at the Department of Transportation (DOT). That’s the message that NCL Vice President of Public Policy, Telecommunications and Fraud John Breyault carried to Congress when he testified before the House Aviation Subcommittee in September. In particular, Breyault called out inaction by the DOT on the issues of family seating, minimum seat sizes, and ancillary fee refunds.

“The DOT has availed itself of legislative loopholes, particularly in regards to families sitting together, to delay or deny rulemakings that would address pressing safety and competition issues in the industry,” Breyault testified. “Allowing an industry like the airlines to self-regulate is a recipe for disaster.”

Privacy
While privacy and data security legislation may have stalled in Congress, NCL continued to move the needle on legislation in the states. In November, NCL Public Policy Manager Brian Young testified in support of the Security Breach Protection Amendment Act at a hearing before the DC Council. The bill would provide meaningful improvements to the District’s data breach notification requirements, require data holders to take precautions to protect data, and empower the Attorney General to better protect Washingtonians.

Protecting gamers
In 2019, more than 164 million Americans, or approximately 65 percent of the population, are reported to play some form of video game, according to the Entertainment Software Association. But as the industry has grown, so too have concerns over the ways that video game developers are seeking to make profits.

In August, NCL’s Breyault testified at a workshop organized by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to examine the use of video game “loot boxes” and other monetization strategies that have exploded in popularity in recent years. The industry is making billions of dollars off players who are willing to pay to get access to the “loot.”

Some advocates are concerned that the practice is essentially gambling and should be regulated as such.

“It’s easy to see the parallel for anyone who’s spent time in a casino,” said Breyault. “Flashing lights, vibrating controllers, exciting music are all designed to reward players who spend additional money beyond what they already spend to obtain the game in the first place. Unfortunately, a growing body of research has linked these techniques to the development of problem gambling in adolescents and young adults.”

Consumer protection in the video game industry is lacking, Breyault told the FTC. Self-regulation via parental ratings doesn’t adequately inform consumers of the ways that video game makers seek to exploit gamers. Disclosure of loot box “drop rates” (the chance that desirable content will be in a loot box) would be a start, but more research is necessary, he argued. NCL will continue to monitor the situation to ensure that gamers are treated fairly by this multi-billion-dollar industry.

Closing digital divide in NY
In June, Young testified before the New York State Public Utilities Commission in Albany on behalf of the more than 750,000 New York residents that rely on Lifeline, which provides low-income consumers with communication services and Internet access. NCL has long advocated for a robust Lifeline program.

The Commission heard arguments for and against a Lifeline program expansion that would roughly double a user’s data and minutes. NCL applauded the state’s interest in closing the digital divide and urged New York to expand the program.

“A lack of affordable Internet access perpetuates inequality,” Young testified. “Lifeline users depend on the program to not just stay in touch with loved ones, but to also stay up-to-date on homework, find and keep jobs, access medical services, manage their finances, and be informed citizens.”
Consumers for Safe CBD
New multi-partner initiative taking on unregulated industry

Consumers have been bombarded with products containing CBD. CBD, or cannabidiol, is a compound found in cannabis and derived from the hemp plant. The CBD market is growing rapidly, with $500 million worth of CBD products sold in 2018 and a forecasted $1.8 billion in sales by 2022. CBD products include oils, candies, soaps, and even dog treats. It has been marketed to a wide audience for treating a range of health concerns, including joint discomfort, anxiety, stress, and other mental and physical ailments.

Such suspect marketing of CBD products include unsubstantiated health claims as innocuous as offering “a higher sense of well-being” to more extreme claims of therapeutic benefits including treating Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s disease, schizophrenia, or AIDS.

To address the “wild west” of the CBD market, NCL launched a new initiative this fall, called Consumers for Safe CBD, in partnership with the Consumer Federation of America and Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America. Consumers for Safe CBD is a new campaign to educate consumers about what is known about CBD and what remains to be studied. The new campaign will also encourage the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to use its existing authority to protect consumers, provide guidance to manufacturers, and encourage further research for FDA-approved CBD treatments.

“This is a clear and present public health issue,” said Sally Greenberg, NCL executive director. “Consumers are being told these products will cure their chronic illnesses and help their anxious pets or children. Yet there is no scientific evidence behind the claims. What’s even more concerning is that, without FDA’s stamp of approval, we do not know what is in these products. Not only could CBD have negative side effects or interactions with other medications, these products contain contaminants and ingredients that could harm consumers. Without safeguards, consumers may be using these products or offering them to their children and pets with blindfolds on.”

Exaggerated claims of unproven benefits are nothing new, but with the recent legalization of CBD, there’s a new explosion of untested products that demand attention from regulators. Advocates believe that CBD could be key to the development of many new treatments and therapies: one indication is the success of the first FDA-approved drug containing CBD in controlling two types of rare, childhood-onset seizures.

“Without better regulation and enforcement, consumers cannot even have confidence that the products they are purchasing contain the amount of CBD listed on the label. The risks of unsafe dosages of CBD and the use of adulterated products make for a minefield of consumer caveat emptor,” said NCL Director of Health Policy Patricia Kelmar.

Clinical studies have demonstrated potential risks of CBD, including liver toxicity, fatigue, and harmful interactions with other drugs. The FDA has recently begun to take action. In October, it issued a strongly worded advisory discouraging pregnant and breastfeeding mothers from using CBD products. It also recently warned a Florida company that was illegally selling unapproved products containing CBD online with unsubstantiated claims that the products treat teething pain and earaches in infants, autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), among other conditions or diseases. NCL welcomes that action by the FDA and is calling for more.

To learn more about the new campaign, visit 4safecbd.org.
NCL giving back in our community.

This fall, NCL staff spent an afternoon volunteering at the DC Central Kitchen (DCCK), a nonprofit whose mission is to combat hunger and poverty in the District through job training and job creation. DCCK provides hands-on culinary job training for those who face barriers to employment, while creating living wage jobs and bringing nutritious, dignified food where it is most needed. NCL staff learned kitchen safety, food preparation techniques, and how much effort goes into preparing meals from scratch. Rolling up our sleeves to volunteer at DCCK and seeing its impact was highly rewarding.

We care about our community, and we know you care about the consumer and labor community. Please give generously to support NCL's work protecting and promoting social and economic justice for consumers and workers with a tax-deductible donation at nclnet.org/donate!