COVID-19 testing roadmap needed to get the country back in business

With the push to reopen business in order to re-start the economy growing louder this spring, the National Consumers League called for universal COVID-19 testing.

“There is strong desire across the country to reopen businesses; we understand and share that frustration,” said NCL Executive Director Sally Greenberg. “But we've lost precious time. The government’s first order of business should be to test everyone—starting with those who are at greatest risk, health care, packing plant, nursing home, and grocery store workers—and expand those tests to asymptomatic people. We need rapid-response testing for every American.”

NCL supports the recommendations of health care experts like former Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Tom Friedan and former Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Administrator Scott Gottlieb. A “Box It In” strategy involves testing, isolating those testing positive, tracing their contacts, and asking those contacts to quarantine.

NCL has laid out the following guidance for a path toward re-opening of the economy and return to work:

**Universal testing**

In order to get people back out to restart the economy, the nation needs tests that can be self-administered, and in adequate numbers so that every person—whether they've shown symptoms or not—can test for COVID-19 before leaving the home on any given day.

The technology is not “pie-in-the-sky.” The FDA has already approved one home-test kit, though it requires lab analysis. And BARDA/HHS has funded another effort to develop an antigen and antibody diagnostic to identify current or past infections in 60 seconds. “We are on the road to getting back to work,” said Greenberg. “But we need to make up for valuable time lost.”

**Antibody testing**

There is a belief that antibodies create immunity, but it's not clear for how long. Serology testing should be provided to people who test negative for COVID-19. As of this writing, the FDA has approved 13 such antibody tests.

Those who are determined to have a sufficient level of antibodies could be cleared to return to work, while still wearing masks and gloves until science has confirmed decisively that antibodies create immunity. Individuals who don't have antibodies would be advised to stay home, but could be cleared to go back to work so long as they test every day before heading out.

When a vaccine ultimately arrives, 95 percent of Americans will need to be vaccinated to achieve herd immunity and widespread protection.

“Our nation has the know-how and manufacturing infrastructure to produce the millions of tests needed to determine whether someone has the virus,” said Greenberg. “But due to lack of leadership at the top, our testing capacity is still, several months after the outbreak, far from where it should be. Tens of millions of Americans have filed for unemployment and thousands of small businesses permanently closed. We need federal leadership, expertise, and financial support to make this happen, and we need it now.”
A message from NCL’s Executive Director Sally Greenberg

Dear NCL Supporters,

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the fragility of America’s social safety net. Some stark statistics about the outbreak, as of this writing: nearly 130,000 Americans have died of COVID-19 in less than 4 months; 36.5 million Americans have filed for unemployment; an estimated 42 percent of jobs may never come back, and women account for 55 percent of the jobs lost. Iconic companies like J. Crew, Neiman Marcus, and Hertz Car Rentals have filed for bankruptcy with surely more to come.

But NCL’s staff and Board of Directors have continued to keep us focused on our mission and—even working from home—haven’t missed a beat. We are here to advocate for the interests of workers and consumers, whose voices are needed throughout this debilitating crisis.

The pandemic has demonstrated the crucial importance of much of NCL’s advocacy work, including the role of vaccines for protecting our citizens and the need for paid sick leave for workers across all industries, including food manufacturing and the restaurant industry.

The pandemic has also shed light on the need for protections against unscrupulous actors: fraudsters engaged in scamming innocent Americans through false claims; opportunistic bad actors have sought to come between consumers and their pocketbooks. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 crisis seems to be no different.

In the earliest days of pandemic panic, reports of overpriced goods were widespread; products were flying off of shelves, and those that remained were often dramatically marked up. NCL learned of $10 milk, $100+ dollar masks, and outrageous prices on toilet paper. Two Tennessee brothers who stockpiled 17,700 bottles of hand sanitizer with the intent to sell them at a mark-up online earned instant national notoriety.

“Like moths to the flame, profit-seekers cannot resist the allure of easy money. In this time of national emergency, it should perhaps come as a little surprise that there are many who wish to make a quick buck off average consumers,” said NCL Executive Director Sally Greenberg.

According to the National Law Review, “in normal times, there would be nothing problematic about a seller’s unilateral decision to increase its prices in response to higher consumer demand. However, with emergency declarations in most—if not all—states, such price increases may lead to hefty civil fines and even imprisonment under state laws prohibiting price gouging.” Indeed, price gouging in times of crisis is illegal in most states. For example, Maryland’s anti-gouging statute prohibits raising the price of many consumer goods and services that increase the seller’s profit by more than 10 percent while the COVID-19 emergency, declared by Governor Larry Hogan, is in effect. California has a similar statute, punishable by up to a year in jail and a $10,000 fine.

While state laws are important, enforcement alone won’t solve this problem,” said Greenberg. “Retailers must also play their part to keep price gouging off their shelves. We are encouraged when we see sellers committing to stomping out price gouging, such as Amazon’s announcement in April of a zero tolerance policy against it.”

In practice, Amazon’s policy means the company is forwarding reports of price gouging and phony COVID-19 remedies.

“The majority of sellers on sites like Amazon, eBay, and other online marketplaces are honest,” said Greenberg. “But these e-commerce marketplaces are where millions of consumers are going to find much-needed products. Particularly for consumers at high risk of severe illness these online services can be a lifeline, enabling them to stay home, and for consumers at high risk of severe illness these online services can be a lifeline, enabling them to stay home, and decreasing their chances of contracting the virus. We call on retailers to do the right thing during this terrible pandemic.”

For some of our most vulnerable workers affected by the virus (page 10), NCL has some other exciting projects in the works this summer, including a major redesign of two of our websites, an off-season refresh of our LifeSmarts consumer literacy and scholarship program for high school students, and the release of new episodes of our We Can Do This! podcast.

Additionally, preparations are underway for our 2020 Annual Trumpeter Awards Dinner, which is planned for Oct. 6 in Washington, DC. This year, we will honor FCC Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel and journalist Vicky Nguyen with Trumpeter Awards, and District of Columbia Attorney General Karl Racine with the Florence Kelley Consumer Leadership Award.

On behalf of NCL’s staff and Board, I wish you good health, safety, and security, and as always, we look forward to hearing from you!

Sally Greenberg

Price gouging: An immediate threat to consumers in new economy

In past natural and man-made disasters, whether in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina or the 2008-09 financial crisis, opportunistic bad actors have sought to come between consumers and their pocketbooks. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 crisis seems to be no different.

In the earliest days of pandemic panic, reports of overpriced goods were widespread; products were flying off of shelves, and those that remained were often dramatically marked up. NCL learned of $10 milk, $100+ dollar masks, and outrageous prices on toilet paper. Two Tennessee brothers who stockpiled 17,700 bottles of hand sanitizer with the intent to sell them at a mark-up online earned instant national notoriety.

“Like moths to the flame, profit-seekers cannot resist the allure of easy money. In this time of national emergency, it should perhaps come as a little surprise that there are many who wish to make a quick buck off average consumers,” said NCL Executive Director Sally Greenberg.

According to the National Law Review, “in normal times, there would be nothing problematic about a seller’s unilateral decision to increase its prices in response to higher consumer demand. However, with emergency declarations in most—if not all—states, such price increases may lead to hefty civil fines and even imprisonment under state laws prohibiting price gouging.” Indeed, price gouging in times of crisis is illegal in most states. For example, Maryland’s anti-gouging statute prohibits raising the price of many consumer goods and services that increase the seller’s profit by more than 10 percent while the COVID-19 emergency, declared by Governor Larry Hogan, is in effect. California has a similar statute, punishable by up to a year in jail and a $10,000 fine.

While state laws are important, enforcement alone won’t solve this problem,” said Greenberg. “Retailers must also play their part to keep price gouging off their shelves. We are encouraged when we see sellers committing to stomping out price gouging, such as Amazon’s announcement in April of a ‘zero tolerance’ policy against it.”

In practice, Amazon’s policy means the company is forwarding reports of price gouging to law enforcement and making it clear to their sellers that price gouging is not allowed. Amazon has removed more than half a million products and suspended thousands of seller accounts in the United States.
The COVID-19 pandemic upended the daily rhythms of hundreds of millions of consumers, seemingly overnight. Airlines canceled more than 90 percent of their flights. Gyms and health clubs closed en masse. Tens of thousands of concerts, Broadway shows, and sporting events have been canceled or postponed indefinitely. What do all these businesses have in common? They all require upfront payment for services (e.g., flight, concert, yoga classes) to be provided at some point in the future. This is billions of dollars of consumers’ money tied up for services that cannot be provided due to COVID-related lockdowns.

While there are many businesses that have provided full refunds, others have not. Many airlines have made refunds for canceled flights difficult even though Department of Transportation regulations require prompt refunds in the event a flight is canceled. Companies like Ticketmaster have given customers mixed messages on whether and how they can get a refund. And many gyms continue to collect membership fees even though they are closed to the public.

“There is no question that businesses are struggling with unprecedented challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic,” said John Breyault, NCL vice president of public policy, telecommunications and fraud. “The airlines that are unable to fly still must maintain their airplanes and pay their employees. Ticketing companies facing canceled events are often at the mercy of promoters, artists, and sports leagues. But the need of these businesses must be weighed against the needs of consumers, tens of millions of whom are newly jobless, struggling to make ends meet, could really use that cash back in their pockets—and should have a right to it.”

NCL has called upon all merchants—including airlines and ticketing companies—to promptly provide consumers with full refunds for canceled and postponed flights and live events. NCL experts have contributed to dozens of newspaper, television, and radio interviews raising awareness about the need for a full refund policy.

“What consumers are being asked to do, essentially, is give airlines, ticketing giants, and other businesses long-term no-interest loans with no expectation for when the service they paid for will be provided,” said Breyault. “At a time when millions of families are wondering where the next mortgage or rent payment is going to come from, withholding this money isn’t fair to consumers.”

NCL has endorsed consumer protection legislation like the Cash Refunds for Coronavirus Cancellations Act of 2020 proposed by consumer champions like Senators Ed Markey (D-MA), Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), and Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), requiring airlines to refund the more than $10 billion from canceled flight reservations. NCL is also a long-time supporter of the Better Oversight of Secondary Sales and Accountability in Concert Ticketing Act of 2019 (BOSS ACT). That bill, introduced by Congressmen Bill Pascrell (D-NJ) and Frank Pallone (D-NJ) and Senator Blumenthal (D-CT) requires that any refunds provided for canceled or postponed events include all ancillary fees paid.

With the return to a post-COVID “normal” still far away, and new outbreaks possible in the fall, getting consumers’ money back will likely continue to be a challenge. NCL is working on the front lines to fight for consumers and their rights to full refunds.

Scammers coming out of woodwork to prey on vulnerable

Today’s economic news is grim. As of this writing, more than 45 million Americans have filed for unemployment benefits. For the newly jobless, state unemployment benefits are a lifeline that helps keep the lights on and provide food for their families. Unfortunately, the combination of billions of dollars in federal stimulus money flowing to state unemployment funds and the tens of millions of new claimants has created a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for identity thieves: unemployment benefits scams.

According to the Secret Service and media reports, organized rings of criminals are working to siphon off these payments, potentially worth hundreds of millions of dollars. In the state of Washington, for example, scammers reportedly made off with nearly $1.6 million in a single month. This scam is reportedly even affecting consumers who have not yet lost their jobs.

In times of crisis or disasters—think major hurricanes, terrorist attacks, and economic slowdowns—scammers take advantage of legitimate fears and concerns. NCL’s Fraud.org project has seen an uptick in complaints about a variety of COVID-19 scams preying on vulnerable, financially strapped, and fearful consumers.

“Scammers running phishing schemes, stimulus check fraud, and even pet adoptions have all been working overtime to use the COVID-19 pandemic as a way to defraud consumers,” said John Breyault, director of NCL’s Fraud.org campaign. “We forecast these will continue and evolve so we are eager to get the word out about how Pennsylvanians can protect themselves.”

In May, NCL hosted a virtual fireside chat with Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro and a panel of consumer protection experts on the growing threat of scams linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. NCL’s Breyault and AG Shapiro discussed what they are hearing from consumers, tactics for reaching the most vulnerable populations, and the importance of collaboration for getting key messages out to consumers.

“The work [NCL] is doing to get the word out is so important,” said General Shapiro. “There will be some people who hear my voice, and some people who hear your voice. But the key is that, collectively, we are warning people about scams and that we’re working together to share actual information—not myths—and the propaganda by one group or the other.”
LifeSmarts: #NeverMoreRelevant during this time of crisis

In-person competition postponed, but program wraps up year by delivering valuable consumer literacy content for online home instruction

This spring has been momentous for all of us, but high school students and educators have faced some unique challenges: classes moved online, sports seasons were canceled, and students missed rites of passage such as prom and graduation ceremonies. By the second week of March, it became clear that the 2020 National LifeSmarts Championship would become another casualty of the COVID-19 pandemic. We began the disappointing task of alerting our staunchest supporters: coaches, students, coordinators, volunteers, and sponsors.

Staff consulted with team coaches and quickly invited all 2020 state champion teams to compete at the 2021 event. Coaches told us that they want their students to have the opportunity to experience the fun and excitement of attending the National LifeSmarts Championship in-person to compete with other bright young consumers over four days, making life-long friends and testing themselves throughout the rigorous competition.

We celebrate the 42 LifeSmarts state champion and wild cards teams who earned spots to compete for the 2020 National title, and we look forward to seeing them next April in Cincinnati, Ohio! We are excited to prepare for a double competition in 2021—our biggest yet—when we will crown both the 2020 and 2021 national champions.

LifeSmarts offers a treasure trove of free resources

At the onset of the pandemic, the LifeSmarts program pivoted to help newly at-home educators, students, and parent-educators make use of the many free educational resources the program provides. We also created new resources to help students learn from home during this challenging time.

New weekly quizzes provide an opportunity for students to quiz independently while allowing coaches to track student scores and progress.

2020 honors

At the conclusion of the 2019-2020 program year, LifeSmarts honored several individuals who have had a big impact on LifeSmarts and in their schools and states.

Coach of the Year: Diane Slaven, Indiana

Echoing the heartfelt nomination by her LifeSmarts team members, we were thrilled to honor long-time LifeSmarts coach Diane Slaven from Franklin County High School in Indiana as the 2020 LifeSmarts Coach of the Year. Her team said it so well:

“Mrs. Slaven sees LifeSmarts as an organization that teaches students things that they will need in their lives, that they aren’t necessarily exposed to in school. That is the reason why she is so invested and has given back to LifeSmarts as a coach for so many years. Mrs. Slaven is dedicated to the success of each student, not only in LifeSmarts but in our lives as well. Mrs. Slaven has led many teams to National competition throughout the years and has not failed to highly motivate and prepare each team. This year Mrs. Slaven is retiring, and is so deserving of this great honor due to everything she has given to us, and LifeSmarts throughout the years.”

Coordinators of the Year: Theresa Kong Kee & Gloryana Akapo, Hawaii

LifeSmarts is proud to recognize Theresa Kong-Kee and Gloryana Akapo, Hawaii LifeSmarts State Coordinators, as LifeSmarts Co-Coordinators of the Year for 2020. As part of the Hawaii Department of Commerce and Consumer Affairs, Theresa and Gloryana run a successful and competitive LifeSmarts program for students and educators. This includes a robust High School level competition and a growing JV program (middle school).

2020 honors

At the conclusion of the 2019-2020 program year, LifeSmarts honored several individuals who have had a big impact on LifeSmarts and in their schools and states.

Coach of the Year: Diane Slaven, Indiana

Echoing the heartfelt nomination by her LifeSmarts team members, we were thrilled to honor long-time LifeSmarts coach Diane Slaven from Franklin County High School in Indiana as the 2020 LifeSmarts Coach of the Year. Her team said it so well:

“Mrs. Slaven sees LifeSmarts as an organization that teaches students things that they will need in their lives, that they aren’t necessarily exposed to in school. That is the reason why she is so invested and has given back to LifeSmarts as a coach for so many years. Mrs. Slaven is dedicated to the success of each student, not only in LifeSmarts but in our lives as well. Mrs. Slaven has led many teams to National competition throughout the years and has not failed to highly motivate and prepare each team. This year Mrs. Slaven is retiring, and is so deserving of this great honor due to everything she has given to us, and LifeSmarts throughout the years.”

Coordinators of the Year: Theresa Kong Kee & Gloryana Akapo, Hawaii

LifeSmarts is proud to recognize Theresa Kong-Kee and Gloryana Akapo, Hawaii LifeSmarts State Coordinators, as LifeSmarts Co-Coordinators of the Year for 2020. As part of the Hawaii Department of Commerce and Consumer Affairs, Theresa and Gloryana run a successful and competitive LifeSmarts program for students and educators. This includes a robust High School level competition and a growing JV program (middle school).

LifeSmarts: #NeverMoreRelevant during this time of crisis

In-person competition postponed, but program wraps up year by delivering valuable consumer literacy content for online home instruction

This spring has been momentous for all of us, but high school students and educators have faced some unique challenges: classes moved online, sports seasons were canceled, and students missed rites of passage such as prom and graduation ceremonies. By the second week of March, it became clear that the 2020 National LifeSmarts Championship would become another casualty of the COVID-19 pandemic. We began the disappointing task of alerting our staunchest supporters: coaches, students, coordinators, volunteers, and sponsors.

Staff consulted with team coaches and quickly invited all 2020 state champion teams to compete at the 2021 event. Coaches told us that they want their students to have the opportunity to experience the fun and excitement of attending the National LifeSmarts Championship in-person to compete with other bright young consumers over four days, making life-long friends and testing themselves throughout the rigorous competition.

We celebrate the 42 LifeSmarts state champion and wild cards teams who earned spots to compete for the 2020 National title, and we look forward to seeing them next April in Cincinnati, Ohio! We are excited to prepare for a double competition in 2021—our biggest yet—when we will crown both the 2020 and 2021 national champions.

LifeSmarts offers a treasure trove of free resources

At the onset of the pandemic, the LifeSmarts program pivoted to help newly at-home educators, students, and parent-educators make use of the many free educational resources the program provides. We also created new resources to help students learn from home during this challenging time.

New weekly quizzes provide an opportunity for students to quiz independently while allowing coaches to track student scores and progress.

2020 honors

At the conclusion of the 2019-2020 program year, LifeSmarts honored several individuals who have had a big impact on LifeSmarts and in their schools and states.

Coach of the Year: Diane Slaven, Indiana

Echoing the heartfelt nomination by her LifeSmarts team members, we were thrilled to honor long-time LifeSmarts coach Diane Slaven from Franklin County High School in Indiana as the 2020 LifeSmarts Coach of the Year. Her team said it so well:

“Mrs. Slaven sees LifeSmarts as an organization that teaches students things that they will need in their lives, that they aren’t necessarily exposed to in school. That is the reason why she is so invested and has given back to LifeSmarts as a coach for so many years. Mrs. Slaven is dedicated to the success of each student, not only in LifeSmarts but in our lives as well. Mrs. Slaven has led many teams to National competition throughout the years and has not failed to highly motivate and prepare each team. This year Mrs. Slaven is retiring, and is so deserving of this great honor due to everything she has given to us, and LifeSmarts throughout the years.”

Coordinators of the Year: Theresa Kong Kee & Gloryana Akapo, Hawaii

LifeSmarts is proud to recognize Theresa Kong-Kee and Gloryana Akapo, Hawaii LifeSmarts State Coordinators, as LifeSmarts Co-Coordinators of the Year for 2020. As part of the Hawaii Department of Commerce and Consumer Affairs, Theresa and Gloryana run a successful and competitive LifeSmarts program for students and educators. This includes a robust High School level competition and a growing JV program (middle school).

LifeSmarts: #NeverMoreRelevant during this time of crisis

In-person competition postponed, but program wraps up year by delivering valuable consumer literacy content for online home instruction

This spring has been momentous for all of us, but high school students and educators have faced some unique challenges: classes moved online, sports seasons were canceled, and students missed rites of passage such as prom and graduation ceremonies. By the second week of March, it became clear that the 2020 National LifeSmarts Championship would become another casualty of the COVID-19 pandemic. We began the disappointing task of alerting our staunchest supporters: coaches, students, coordinators, volunteers, and sponsors.

Staff consulted with team coaches and quickly invited all 2020 state champion teams to compete at the 2021 event. Coaches told us that they want their students to have the opportunity to experience the fun and excitement of attending the National LifeSmarts Championship in-person to compete with other bright young consumers over four days, making life-long friends and testing themselves throughout the rigorous competition.

We celebrate the 42 LifeSmarts state champion and wild cards teams who earned spots to compete for the 2020 National title, and we look forward to seeing them next April in Cincinnati, Ohio! We are excited to prepare for a double competition in 2021—our biggest yet—when we will crown both the 2020 and 2021 national champions.

LifeSmarts offers a treasure trove of free resources

At the onset of the pandemic, the LifeSmarts program pivoted to help newly at-home educators, students, and parent-educators make use of the many free educational resources the program provides. We also created new resources to help students learn from home during this challenging time.

New weekly quizzes provide an opportunity for students to quiz independently while allowing coaches to track student scores and progress.
The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a boom of dangerous claims by CBD marketers. Sorting through bogus health claims is significant and we must ensure products are tested and regulated for safety. The need for science-backed treatments amid the coronavirus crisis, said Greenberg. Moreover, they spread misinformation among consumers anxiously seeking ways to stay safe and healthy amidst the coronavirus crisis.

In an op-ed in The Hill published in May, Greenberg noted that a number of CBD manufacturers and stores are falsely marketing, tactics to promote bogus products claiming to protect users against the coronavirus or provide relief for those infected—as well as peddling downright phony coronavirus testing products. “These false claims touting unproven medical benefits are nothing more than craven attempts to take advantage of fearful consumers,” said NCL Executive Director Sally Greenberg. “Moreover, they spread misinformation among consumers anxiously seeking ways to stay safe and healthy amidst the coronavirus crisis.”

Across the United States, people are rising to the historic health needs and challenges posed by coronavirus, with healthcare workers on the front lines risking their lives, and businesses pivoting to manufacture much-needed medical and protective supplies. But deep concerns about the health implications—what happens to people who contract the disease during the health and financial perspective—are top of mind for many of us. And a cynical minority has seized on the crisis to employ unscrupulous, and frankly dangerous, marketing tactics to promote bogus products claiming to protect users against the coronavirus or provide relief for those infected—as well as peddling downright phony coronavirus testing products.

In an op-ed in The Hill published in May, Greenberg noted that a number of CBD manufacturers and stores are falsely promoting unproven medical benefits of CBD products. A CBD store in Portland, OR, for example, was recently ordered by the office of the Portland City Auditor to take down signs claiming that its products could boost immunity against COVID-19. "False claims such as this are particularly dangerous as consumers anxiously attempt to stay safe and healthy amidst the coronavirus crisis,” said Greenberg. "The need for science-backed treatments is significant and we must ensure products are tested and regulated for safety.”

Contrary to claims being made by CBD marketers that products containing cannabidiol can help those suffering from coronavirus, recent studies have actually found potential harmful side effects of cannabis products on infected coronavirus patients. Aurelius Data cautions the public against the potential harmful side effects that can come from consuming cannabis products with Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) if a patient is infected with COVID-19. And studies have shown that many unregulated CBD products have been found to contain THC, though the labels may not disclose this. "These uncertain times, we urge consumers to continue to take precautions,” said Greenberg. "Follow CDC guidelines for COVID-19, practice safe social distancing, and at the same time avoid THC products and all untested, unregulated CBD products to help keep your family, friends, and communities safe.”

NCL’s latest podcast episode: Born too soon

In February, NCL partnered with March of Dimes to convene a group of experts focused on the high rates of premature births in the United States, maternal outcomes, and the societal stressors that disproportionately affect women of color. "It’s critical that consumers can rely on their insurers to follow the spirit and letter of the law,” said NCL Associate Director of Health Policy Nissa Shaffi. "Our message to insurers is this: act in good faith; use the savings you are accruing from lower elective care to fully cover the costs associated with this pandemic; remove arbitrary restrictions; be clear and fully transparent about what you are offering; and stay the course for the duration.”

At-home vision assessments no replacement for in-office visits

With COVID-19 keeping many of us at home, companies claiming to offer at-home vision tests are ramping up their marketing, despite the fact that there is no U.S. Food and Drug Administration-approved at-home device that people can use to self-conduct a vision assessment, let alone a full eye examination. These devices aren’t even proven to provide an accurate vision prescription. NCL has long recommended an annual, in-person eye exam as part of consumers’ annual health and wellness routines. “Consumers need to be wary of products that claim that their at-home devices can provide an eye exam or a vision prescription and should instead consult their eye doctors to ensure they are getting safe solutions,” said Shaffi.

Advocating for emergency air transport coverage

In March, NCL sent a letter to the CEOs of Cigna, Aetna, and UnitedHealth Group, urging them to enter into productive negotiations with air medical service providers to ensure coverage of emergency air medical transportation. The ask came as the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the country, making air medical services even more essential, particularly in rural America. “We are asking that insurers review their policies and enter into network negotiations with air medical service providers so that this critical service is covered, and patients are never left with a bill they cannot pay.”

Script Your Future 2020 Honors

Each year, NCL hosts the Script Your Future Medication Adherence Team Challenge, a competition among students of pharmacy, nursing, and medicine to raise awareness about medication adherence. Students conduct outreach in their communities and implement creative solutions to address non-adherence as a critical public health issue. Here are this year’s winners. To learn more about the project, visit ScriptYourFuture.org.
Farmworkers and COVID-19: ‘A ticking time bomb’
Advocates strategizing about how to protect particularly vulnerable population

It’s been referred to as a “ticking time bomb,” the coronavirus and its potential impact on farmworkers—the incredibly hard-working men, women, and children who pick our fruits and vegetables and provide other essential agricultural work. Farmworkers are notoriously underpaid for dirty, back-breaking work and now face great risk from COVID-19. Farmworker advocacy groups that National Consumers League (NCL) works with or supports—such as Farmworker Justice, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, the Federal Farmworkers of America (UFW), the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, and a national cadre of legal aid attorneys—have spent recent months strategizing about ways to protect this community that is especially vulnerable to the virus.

Farmworkers are poor, with extremely limited access to health care and, due to their need for a paycheck, often report to work despite illness. The risks of an outbreak are especially great because workers often travel in close physical proximity to one another as they harvest, and workers often live in overcrowded, dilapidated facilities, including hand-washing, and limited access to sanitary cars. Despite their essential work, farmworkers are notorious underpaid for dirty, back-breaking work and now face great risk from COVID-19.

The majority of farmworkers are immigrants from Mexico or are the children of Mexican immigrants, often socially isolated from mainstream America. Many farmworkers leave school at an early age and many bring their children to work in the fields to supplement their meager incomes. Language and cultural barriers further their isolation. NCL, through the Child Labor Coalition (CLC), which it founded and co-chairs, continues to work to close the loopholes in labor laws that allow children in agriculture to work at early ages—often 12—and to begin performing hazardous work at age 16.

When the virus began to move into America’s rural areas, many socially- and culturally-isolated farmworkers hadn’t heard about the virus,” said Reid Maki, director of child labor issues and coordinator of the CLC. “Some were confused that the grocery store shelves were empty and that bottled water suddenly cost much more. In some cases, farmworkers were not being told about the virus or the need to take special precautions while working.”

Farmworkers face an alarming dearth of protective equipment needed to prevent the spread of the virus. Advocacy groups are urgently racing to obtain much-needed masks and other protective gear.

A farmworker with COVID-19 is unlikely to know he or she has it and, therefore, very likely to keep working and infect their family and coworkers. Recently, a grower's group revealed plans to lower pay for agricultural guest workers who sacrifice home and family to come to the United States to perform arduous farm labor. Advocates fear that decreasing guest worker wages would drive down wages for farmworkers already living and working in the United States.

Concerned about these developments, the CLC wrote letters in May to Congress asking for additional nutritional and childcare resources for farmworker families.

To learn more, visit StopChildLabor.org.

How to get involved
✓ Sign the Food Chain Workers Alliance petition to urge Congress to include resources for food chain workers: tinyurl.com/7q9d6wsc
✓ Sign UFW’s petition urging Congress to stop Trump Administration efforts to lower wages for agricultural guest workers: tinyurl.com/9y9gsow
✓ Make masks and send them to farmworker groups in your state.
✓ Urge congressional representatives to fund farmworker relief efforts.

Pandemic food briefs: Meat plants, paid sick leave, and alcohol use on the rise

Coronavirus threatening poultry, meatpacking workers

Media coverage has highlighted spikes in coronavirus at meat plants across the United States, with hundreds of reported cases in recent weeks—a major concern for worker welfare and for the safety of our food supply chain. Reports of meat processing plants being forced to close temporarily due to workers contracting COVID-19 has also raised concerns about shortages—and rising prices—of beef, pork, and poultry.

It’s easy to imagine why, in these environments, the virus is easily transmitted. Workers stand elbow-to-elbow to perform the low-wage work of cutting and packing meat. Many have been forced to report to work on the lines of these packing plants while being sick because they cannot afford to stay home and sacrifice paychecks. Many of the workers in these environments are people of color and immigrants earning low wages and working in overcrowded conditions. The items that end up on the plates of millions of families across the United States.

Some workers have stage walkouts to protest being insufficiently protected. United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), which has a seat on the National Consumers League’s Board of Directors, has engaged in talks with Cargill, which has agreed to make a number of worker safety improvements. UFCW will work to keep workers safe at the packing plants while Cargill is honoring the agreement.

Employees interviewed for the study reported extreme management pressure that led to workers being pressured to work while sick; undercooked chicken being served to customers by undertrained grill cooks; and workers being unable to take breaks to wash their hands for hours on end.

In April, NCL welcomed the news that the Los Angeles U.S. Attorney’s office had settled a case and imposed a $25 million fine on the company—the largest criminal fine ever for a food safety case—for repeated violations of federal food safety laws.

20+ years of asking for alcohol labeling

Americans have access to labeling information about the composition and nutrition of everything they eat, drink, or swallow with one notable exception: alcoholic beverages. For more than two decades, NCL has called on the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) to require an easy-to-read, standardized “Alcohol Facts” beverage label. Better labeling is needed now more than ever; during the COVID-19 pandemic’s stay-at-home orders, one in three Americans is drinking more. Stay tuned for news from NCL about our latest efforts on this front this summer.

Farmworkers harvesting onions in El Centro, California.
Stand in solidarity with NCL

As our nation has been gripped by the COVID-19 virus, the staff and Board of Directors of the National Consumers League have remained 100 percent committed to doing everything possible to fight for consumer and worker protections in this rapidly-changing environment.

The importance of NCL’s mission has been reinforced during the coronavirus era. The pandemic has brought much of NCL’s longstanding advocacy into the spotlight: the crucial importance of vaccines for individuals and society as a whole; the need for a strong watchdog to protect against predatory scams and business practices; demands for improved airline passenger protections; the importance of paid sick days for employees; and highlighting the role of our federal health care agencies and their dedicated scientists and doctors.

With safety and health as a paramount concern, NCL pledges to continue to carry out our work in this time of unprecedented upheaval of our economy and our way of life.

We encourage you to continue supporting NCL by donating or sponsoring our annual Trumpeter Awards Dinner, which will be celebrated on October 6 in Washington, DC.

Visit nclnet.org/trumpeter_awards to learn more about this year’s honorees.