

January 12, 2009

Dear Senator:

Consumers Union, the nonprofit, independent publisher of *Consumer Reports* magazine with more than 7.4 million print and online subscribers, hopes to be able to work closely with you and your staff on a variety of consumer issues facing the 111th Congress. For 72 years, we have worked to improve the marketplace for consumers in health care, product and food safety, finance and telecommunications, and we are the premier source of independent information for consumers on these issues.

American consumers everywhere are feeling the impact of our struggling economy. That is why Consumers Union, along with other public interest groups, are calling for the restoration and funding of the U.S. Office of Consumer Affairs, which was shut down in 1997 after being established by executive order under President Nixon. This office, headed by a strong leader, could provide an essential voice for consumers in the White House and across the Federal government. As you begin to tackle all of the tremendously pressing and complex problems confronting our nation we would urge you to keep in mind this request as well as several important initiatives that can improve consumers' health, safety and financial well-being.

Here are some of the improvements that our organization seeks for all consumers:

Health

- Enact health care reform in 2009 that guarantees every American permanent access to comprehensive, quality, affordable health care and that ensures consumers, patients, and taxpayers get better value for their health care dollar.
- Reauthorize and strengthen the Children's Health Insurance Program.
- Provide funding for expanded comparative effectiveness research on prescription drugs and treatments, and enact reforms that ensure that patients get the appropriate care based on unbiased scientific findings.
- Establish a national system to collect and publish hospital-acquired infection rates and preventable medical errors.
- Fix the "doughnut hole" coverage gap in Medicare's prescription-drug program, which puts a heavy financial burden on consumers. Remove the ban preventing price negotiations with drug companies, and create a Medicare-administered plan with predictable coverage and premiums.
- Give the Food and Drug Administration more authority to improve prescription drug safety. Support new leadership and funding of the FDA to ensure the safety of drug and drug ingredient imports, strengthen the FDA's ability to ensure honest science in the development of new drugs, and reject any pre-emption of the states' rights to protect consumers from unsafe drugs.

Consumers Union

Headquarters Office

101 Truman Avenue
Yonkers, New York 10703-1057
(914) 378-2029
(914) 378-2992 (fax)

Washington Office

1101 17th street N.W. # 500
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 462-6262
(202) 265-9548 (fax)

West Coast Office

1535 Mission Street
San Francisco, CA 94103-2512
(415) 461-6747
(415) 431-0906 (Fax)

South West Office

506 W. 14th, Suite A
Austin, TX 78701-1723
(512) 477-4431
(512) 477-8934 (fax)

- Require the disclosure of any gifts or other things of value by drug and device companies to health care providers.

Money

- Reform the mortgage and other credit markets by imposing strong lending reforms, including requirements for underwriting the consumer's ability to repay any loan being sought, a fiduciary duty for lenders and brokers to the borrower, and accountability for all who are part of a loan transaction.
- Clean up unfair credit card practices now by moving up the effective date of new credit card regulations, and provide additional credit card protections, including limiting the size and duration of penalty fees, prohibiting fees for payment over the phone or on the Internet, and restricting credit card companies ability to market and issue credit cards to young people who do not have the ability to pay or parental consent.
- Reduce foreclosures by requiring systematic and sustainable loan modifications.
- Allow court supervised loan modification on primary residences.
- Establish an independent agency similar to the Consumer Product Safety Commission, to review new financial products for safety, before they can be marketed to the public.
- Restore the ability to states to develop and enforce consumer protection standards in financial services.
- Provide effective oversight to ensure that regulators do their jobs to protect consumers, investors, and taxpayers.

Safety

- Give FDA the resources to inspect food processing facilities at least annually on average, and a mandate to issue regulations governing on-farm and processing facility practices. Currently, one in four Americans becomes ill, and 5000 people die every year as a result of food borne disease, yet FDA currently inspects facilities an average of only once every ten years.
- Give FDA the resources and authority to assure the safety of food and drugs made abroad. FDA currently inspects less than one percent of imported food.
- Assure FDA protects the public with regard to hazardous chemicals, such as BPA in baby bottles and can liners, nanoparticles in cosmetics, and mercury in fish.
- Assure that USDA strictly enforces meat and poultry safety standards. USDA must also end its prohibition on private companies doing mad cow disease testing on their own.
- Give FDA and USDA clear authority to order recalls. Both agencies must rely on jawboning to get companies to recall dangerous foods voluntarily.
- Prevent any erosion of the standards for the USDA organic label. Require labeling so consumers will know when controversial new technologies, such as cloning and genetic engineering of food animals, and nanotechnology, are used in food production.
- Assure strong, prompt and effective implementation of the Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act (CPSIA).
- Ensure that the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) implements dynamic rollover testing to evaluate vehicle roof crush strength.
- Direct NHTSA to revise the LATCH standards for child safety seats, and to continue its work on the development of a side impact standard for child restraints.

Energy

- Foster U.S. leadership in renewable energy innovation, which will help to lower the cost of alternative energy sources for consumers, and reduce costs overall. Congress needs to pass legislation to lower greenhouse gas emissions.
- Address the problems that contribute to gasoline price spikes, by setting clear targets to reduce consumption and improve fuel efficiency standards.
- Prevent pricing abuse in the energy markets by monitoring for anticompetitive conduct, including the electronic trading of energy futures, which can artificially inflate prices.
- Roll back billions of dollars in oil industry subsidies and invest the savings in tax incentives that encourage renewable energy innovation, conservation and efficiency.

Communications

- Consider delaying the February 17 date for the switch to digital television to minimize the number of consumers who will lose TV signals, including a strategy to fix the flaws in the federal coupon program created to offset the cost of this transition for consumers.
- Ensure that the Internet remains open, and ensure that any potential blocking of Internet services by cable or phone companies is remedied quickly.
- Facilitate competition and growth in high speed Internet services to underserved areas and fund skills training to increase the adoption of new communications technologies.
- Put an end to the anticompetitive practices of cable-TV and phone companies that inflate prices and make it difficult for consumers to choose products that may have better service and lower prices.
- Give consumers the right to pick and pay only for the TV channels they want to watch.
- Promote diverse and locally-controlled media outlets.

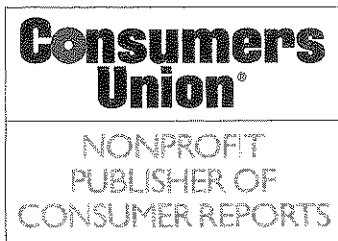
We have also attached a copy of our 2008 annual report that highlights some of our work in these areas, as well as our other efforts to protect the interests of consumers by engaging them in the effort to transform the marketplace into a more just and fair one.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of these issues. We look forward to working closely with you in the months ahead as we continue to seek a wide range of health, safety, and financial improvements for all consumers. Please contact us if you have any questions or would like additional information.

Sincerely,



Ellen Bloom
Director, Federal Policy and Washington Office
Consumers Union
202-642-6262



January 12, 2009

Dear Representative:

Consumers Union, the nonprofit, independent publisher of *Consumer Reports* magazine with more than 7.4 million print and online subscribers, hopes to be able to work closely with you and your staff on a variety of consumer issues facing the 111th Congress. For 72 years, we have worked to improve the marketplace for consumers in health care, product and food safety, finance and telecommunications, and we are the premier source of independent information for consumers on these issues.

American consumers everywhere are feeling the impact of our struggling economy. That is why Consumers Union, along with other public interest groups, are calling for the restoration and funding of the U.S. Office of Consumer Affairs, which was shut down in 1997 after being established by executive order under President Nixon. This office, headed by a strong leader, could provide an essential voice for consumers in the White House and across the Federal government. As you begin to tackle all of the tremendously pressing and complex problems confronting our nation we would urge you to keep in mind this request as well as several important initiatives that can improve consumers' health, safety and financial well-being.

Here are some of the improvements that our organization seeks for all consumers:

Health

- Enact health care reform in 2009 that guarantees every American permanent access to comprehensive, quality, affordable health care and that ensures consumers, patients, and taxpayers get better value for their health care dollar.
- Reauthorize and strengthen the Children's Health Insurance Program.
- Provide funding for expanded comparative effectiveness research on prescription drugs and treatments, and enact reforms that ensure that patients get the appropriate care based on unbiased scientific findings.
- Establish a national system to collect and publish hospital-acquired infection rates and preventable medical errors.
- Fix the "doughnut hole" coverage gap in Medicare's prescription-drug program, which puts a heavy financial burden on consumers. Remove the ban preventing price negotiations with drug companies, and create a Medicare-administered plan with predictable coverage and premiums.
- Give the Food and Drug Administration more authority to improve prescription drug safety. Support new leadership and funding of the FDA to ensure the safety of drug and drug ingredient imports, strengthen the FDA's ability to ensure honest science in the development of new drugs, and reject any pre-emption of the states' rights to protect consumers from unsafe drugs.

Consumers Union

Headquarters Office

101 Truman Avenue
Yonkers, New York 10703-1057
(914) 378-2029
(914) 378-2992 (fax)

Washington Office

1101 17th street N.W. # 500
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 462-6262
(202) 265-9548 (fax)

West Coast Office

1535 Mission Street
San Francisco, CA 94103-2512
(415) 461-6747
(415) 431-0906 (Fax)

South West Office

506 W. 14th, Suite A
Austin, TX 78701-1723
(512) 477-4431
(512) 477-8934 (fax)

- Require the disclosure of any gifts or other things of value by drug and device companies to health care providers.

Money

- Reform the mortgage and other credit markets by imposing strong lending reforms, including requirements for underwriting the consumer's ability to repay any loan being sought, a fiduciary duty for lenders and brokers to the borrower, and accountability for all who are part of a loan transaction.
- Clean up unfair credit card practices now by moving up the effective date of new credit card regulations, and provide additional credit card protections, including limiting the size and duration of penalty fees, prohibiting fees for payment over the phone or on the Internet, and restricting credit card companies ability to market and issue credit cards to young people who do not have the ability to pay or parental consent.
- Reduce foreclosures by requiring systematic and sustainable loan modifications.
- Allow court supervised loan modification on primary residences.
- Establish an independent agency similar to the Consumer Product Safety Commission, to review new financial products for safety, before they can be marketed to the public.
- Restore the ability to states to develop and enforce consumer protection standards in financial services.
- Provide effective oversight to ensure that regulators do their jobs to protect consumers, investors, and taxpayers.

Safety

- Give FDA the resources to inspect food processing facilities at least annually on average, and a mandate to issue regulations governing on-farm and processing facility practices. Currently, one in four Americans becomes ill, and 5000 people die every year as a result of food borne disease, yet FDA currently inspects facilities an average of only once every ten years.
- Give FDA the resources and authority to assure the safety of food and drugs made abroad. FDA currently inspects less than one percent of imported food.
- Assure FDA protects the public with regard to hazardous chemicals, such as BPA in baby bottles and can liners, nanoparticles in cosmetics, and mercury in fish.
- Assure that USDA strictly enforces meat and poultry safety standards. USDA must also end its prohibition on private companies doing mad cow disease testing on their own.
- Give FDA and USDA clear authority to order recalls. Both agencies must rely on jawboning to get companies to recall dangerous foods voluntarily.
- Prevent any erosion of the standards for the USDA organic label. Require labeling so consumers will know when controversial new technologies, such as cloning and genetic engineering of food animals, and nanotechnology, are used in food production.
- Assure strong, prompt and effective implementation of the Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act (CPSIA).
- Ensure that the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) implements dynamic rollover testing to evaluate vehicle roof crush strength.
- Direct NHTSA to revise the LATCH standards for child safety seats, and to continue its work on the development of a side impact standard for child restraints.

Energy

- Foster U.S. leadership in renewable energy innovation, which will help to lower the cost of alternative energy sources for consumers, and reduce costs overall. Congress needs to pass legislation to lower greenhouse gas emissions.
- Address the problems that contribute to gasoline price spikes, by setting clear targets to reduce consumption and improve fuel efficiency standards.
- Prevent pricing abuse in the energy markets by monitoring for anticompetitive conduct, including the electronic trading of energy futures, which can artificially inflate prices.
- Roll back billions of dollars in oil industry subsidies and invest the savings in tax incentives that encourage renewable energy innovation, conservation and efficiency.

Communications

- Consider delaying the February 17 date for the switch to digital television to minimize the number of consumers who will lose TV signals, including a strategy to fix the flaws in the federal coupon program created to offset the cost of this transition for consumers.
- Ensure that the Internet remains open, and ensure that any potential blocking of Internet services by cable or phone companies is remedied quickly.
- Facilitate competition and growth in high speed Internet services to underserved areas and fund skills training to increase the adoption of new communications technologies.
- Put an end to the anticompetitive practices of cable-TV and phone companies that inflate prices and make it difficult for consumers to choose products that may have better service and lower prices.
- Give consumers the right to pick and pay only for the TV channels they want to watch.
- Promote diverse and locally-controlled media outlets.

We have also attached a copy of our 2008 annual report that highlights some of our work in these areas, as well as our other efforts to protect the interests of consumers by engaging them in the effort to transform the marketplace into a more just and fair one.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of these issues. We look forward to working closely with you in the months ahead as we continue to seek a wide range of health, safety, and financial improvements for all consumers. Please contact us if you have any questions or would like additional information.

Sincerely,



Ellen Bloom
Director, Federal Policy and Washington Office
Consumers Union
202-642-6262