

# Rodent Control Program Assessment: Austin/Travis County (TX) Health and Human Services Department

July 2015

## Introduction

In Austin/Travis County, rodents are invading neighborhoods, damaging property, and creating public health concerns. The Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department's Environmental Health Services Division has a Rodent and Vector Control Program that handles all rodent, mosquito, and other vector-related problems in the area. This program has been operating for just over 20 years. Funding for rodent control activities is located within the Rodent and Vector Control Program budget, where mosquito control uses the majority of the funds. The program is funded primarily through local support, and the funding for rodent control has decreased within the past five years. This decrease in funding has resulted in fewer rodent control staff.

## Rodent Control Activities

The Rodent and Vector Control Program is complaint-based and does not actively seek out rodent infestations. The program assists property owners with eradicating both mosquitos and rodents on their property. In 2014, the county received approximately 10 rodent-related complaints each month; the majority were about the Norway rat, roof rat, and house mice. To submit a complaint, residents call a phone line and leave a message. The program records and tracks the complaints in the Environmental Health Services database.

While the program does not yet use geographical information system (GIS) mapping for rodents (GIS is currently used only for mosquitos), staff have identified problem areas such as old neighborhoods where rodents can nest easily or barns in rural areas. Using integrated pest management concepts, program staff visit complaint sites and analyze the area. For example, when following up on a complaint, an inspector surveys the perimeter of the building, the street, and surrounding homes and looks for rodent entry points into the property.

The program relies on being notified of cases of rodent-borne diseases by the Epidemiology and Health Statistics Unit. In 2014, no cases of rodent-borne diseases were reported. If a case were reported, the program would respond by visiting the site. The program does not track rodent-related bites/injuries.

In 2008, the county experienced an outbreak of murine typhus, with 33 confirmed human cases. To contain the outbreak quickly, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention worked



Photo: <http://www.freeimages.com/photo/1363440>

closely with the Austin/Travis Health Department. Health officials conducted an external site assessment of the physical property, including evaluations of environmental factors such as housing structure, vegetation, water features, food sources, and evidence of animals present. When possible, officials asked household owners about their use of pesticides, ownership of domestic animals, use of flea-control products, history of flea infestations, and reported past evidence of rodents. Opossums were found to be seropositive for *Rickettsia typhi*, and although seropositive rats were rarely or never detected, *Rickettsia typhi* has historically been maintained among rats and oriental rat fleas. Typhus is now endemic in the area, and whenever there is a reported case, the program has protocols to investigate and control outbreaks.

## Public Education

The Rodent and Vector Control Program shares best practices and information about rodents and other vectors that can potentially compromise the public's health. In addition to presenting at community health fairs, staff educate the public when investigating complaints; for example, the program educates residents about how to store dog food, encourages residents to switch from plastic to metal or glass containers, and provides guidance on how to avoid rats or prevent them from returning.

In the future, the Rodent and Vector Control Program hopes to coordinate with a non-governmental organization to help people repair their homes and create long-term solutions for rodent problems.



## Policies and Regulations

The Rodent and Vector Control Program relies on the Code Enforcement Department to handle infestations in homes and rental properties, ensuring that codes and ordinances are upheld. Moreover, the Code Enforcement Department enforces any ordinance or law that affects rodent populations, such as those related to debris or substandard structures. Also, while the program cannot technically refer constituents to a private pest-control company, staff use informational handouts from Texas AgriLife and share best practices and strategies. The program has numerous laws and regulations to address rodent complaints from the public and to educate the public. The program has a five-year policy review process. Laws and regulations related to rodent control are reviewed as needed.

## Rodent Control Program Workforce

Processes exist to ensure employees have proper licenses and certifications. Staff must hold and maintain a Texas Department of Agriculture non-commercial pesticide license. The program also has an internal performance-management plan. The program offers opportunities for staff to attend training and continuing education courses to keep current on best practices.

## Conclusion

The biggest challenge for the Rodent and Vector Control Program is acquiring funding to help individuals fix their properties in a way that will create long-lasting solutions to rodent infestations. However, residents cannot always afford permanent solutions, such as repairing plumbing or holes in walls. The program is also having difficulty informing the public that the health department is not a pest control operation that should be relied upon annually to provide free, quick-fix solutions.

The program successfully educated and reached many different populations in the county, such as Spanish-speaking communities. The program also developed successful and effective ways to explain complicated rodent-related issues in simple, understandable terms.

In the future, the Rodent and Vector Control Program hopes to coordinate with a non-governmental organization to help people repair their homes and create long-term solutions for rodent problems. Also, staff hope to attend more trainings, especially those that cover the structural component of rodent control to learn how rodents enter and inhabit the inside of buildings. Overall, the Rodent and Vector Control Program will continue to work diligently to control the rodent population and improve public health in Austin/Travis County.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

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