

# Rodent Control Program Assessment: Philadelphia Department of Public Health

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## Introduction

Philadelphia has both vacant buildings and beautiful inner-city neighborhoods and parks that rodents are inhabiting. The well-established Vector Control Program within the Environmental Health Division of the Philadelphia Department of Public Health has kept the rodent population at bay for over 100 years. This program is fully funded through the city's general fund, and the budget has remained the same for the past five years.

## Rodent Control Activities

The Vector Control Program is both a proactive and complaint-based program. Generally, the program responds to complaints about rodents in residences and outdoors. Environmental health inspectors examine sites, treat problems, and recommend ways to keep residences rodent-free. In Philadelphia, the most common rodent is the Norway rat. These rats generated as many as 600 rodent complaints each month in 2014, which were received on a local hotline and recorded in a database. To monitor and control rodent-related activity effectively, the program uses integrated pest management principles (IPM). Program staff both reactively and proactively combat rodent infestations. While they continually respond to complaints, they also map and track the location of rat populations to handle overpopulated areas. Staff have a working list of 50 to 75 problem sites that are regularly monitored.

When staff respond to a complaint, they are trained to identify a rodent's entry points. They survey the area and use rodenticides where needed. The program has mechanics on staff that perform 80 to 100 rat-proofing services each year, including filling holes with concrete and minor plumbing repairs.

The program relies on experts in the Division of Disease Control to notify the program of any rodent-borne diseases. The city had no rodent-borne diseases within the past year. If a rodent-borne case were reported, the program would respond with IPM control measures, inspections, and site visits. The program recently hired an environmental public health epidemiologist as part of a plan to develop a surveillance plan for rodent control efforts. The program tracks rodent-related bites/injuries through a complaints database; staff are also notified via the Division of Disease Control. In the past year, the program has been informed of approximately two to three rodent-related bites/injuries. The program currently does not capture rodents, but it did so in the past, nor do staff test blood for pathogens or comb for parasites.



Staff at the Philadelphia Department of Health

Photo courtesy of the Philadelphia Department of Health

## Public Education and Partnerships

While the program does not have a rodent-specific communications plan, the Vector Control Program has established several educational outreach programs to keep the public up-to-date on how to handle rodent and other vector-related problems. For example, in the neighborhood program, rodent control staff educate the public about best practices for avoiding rodents, such as using metal containers for food or not taking out trash until the morning of trash day. The program also provides information about rodents on its website and provides advice during complaint follow-ups.

To combat severe rat infestations, the Vector Control Program partnered with several city departments. For example, staff worked with the city water department, parks and recreation, and neighborhood and community organizations. These collaborations helped create permanent, successful solutions to rat infestations.

## Policies and Regulations

The city's health department reviews any local regulations and ordinances related to rodent control, such as the Philadelphia Property Maintenance Code. Recommendations from the Vector Control Program can be made through the commissioner or deputy of health in Philadelphia. All rodent control measures must be in accordance with Regulations of Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture (PDA) Title 7, meaning all rodenticide applications must be made by a PDA-licensed pest control operator, applying only Environmental Protection Agency-registered pesticides consistent with the label.

The Vector Control Program has been securing the health of the public for over 100 years by controlling the rodent populations and will continue to do so for years to come.



As a general policy, the Vector Control Program cannot recommend people to private rodent control companies, but staff can educate the public about what kind of company to hire and how to avoid pests on their own. The Vector Control Program also has a policy requiring that every complaint be addressed within 72 hours.

## Rodent Control Program Workforce

Processes exist to ensure employees have proper licenses and certifications. All Vector Control Program staff are certified pest control operators. The program has an internal performance management plan. Monthly trainings continually strengthen the staff's ability to manage rodent populations and their public health implications. Program technicians are expected to apply newly identified best practices.

## Evaluation

Currently, the program does not have a rodent-specific evaluation plan, but there is a comprehensive evaluation of the Environmental Health Division. To assess progress and project new ways to improve existing programs, the Vector Control Program team meets annually.

## Conclusion

A significant challenge for the Vector Control Program is hiring new staff. Moreover, the Vector Control Program is having difficulty raising awareness of the issue and filling vacant positions. Another problem for the program is getting additional funding from the city. Despite difficulty obtaining funding, a major success is the program's ability to demonstrate its worth and value as a public health entity in Philadelphia.

The program has successfully demonstrated the value of having a vector control program. An example of a success for the Vector Control Program was work in the Historic Love Park and Rittenhouse Square. On these projects, staff partnered

with many different departments and organizations to control the infestation. The teams collaborated to change trash cans, plant different vegetation, use specific sizes of gravel, and educate the community and nearby businesses about how to avoid rodents. The program successfully managed the rodent population in these areas due to the collaboration of different organizations and the collective use of IPM.

In the future, the Vector Control Program hopes to make more training available to staff and have staff attend a professional conference on rodent control. The Vector Control Program has been securing the health of the public for over 100 years by controlling the rodent populations and will continue to do so for years to come.

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