

# Rodent Control Program Assessment: Department of Health in Washington, DC

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## Introduction

In Washington, DC, rodent control is conducted by the Rodent and Vector Control Division within the Health Regulation and Licensing Administration, Office of Food, Drug, Radiation and Community Hygiene, of the Government of the District of Columbia Department of Health. The program has been around for almost 50 years. Rodent control activities are funded by local support. The funding for rodent control has fluctuated within the past five years.

## Rodent Control Activities

As part of rodent control activities, the Rodent and Vector Control Division is both a proactive and complaint-based program. The program's integrated approach includes community outreach, surveys, abatement, enforcement, and cooperation with other city agencies. The program's abatement efforts use registered products to bait rodents in outdoor burrows on public property. The program will also bait private property in certain circumstances. The program receives rodent complaints via the city's 311 line. Complaints are tracked via a database. The program dispatches rodent control specialists within two days of a complaint. The program references historical data and trends, such as rodent complaints, when performing rodent control activities. In 2014, the program received approximately 250 complaints per month, depending on the season. The program follows integrated pest management (IPM) concepts in its rodent control efforts.

In Washington, DC, the most common rodents are Norway rats. The program relies on being notified of cases of rodent-borne diseases by the health department's Epidemiology Division. In the past year, no cases of rodent-borne diseases were reported. If a case were reported, staff would respond with IPM control measures, inspections, and site visits. The health department does not have a laboratory. The Department of Forensic Science's laboratory is capable of supporting investigations of rodent-related emergencies. The program does not track rodent-related bites or injuries.

The program conducts community assessments to identify rodent issues, for example, by using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology. The program is exploring handheld devices for enforcement and tracking. The most common rodent-related issues include property and infrastructure damage, rodent sightings, and infestations. The program does not capture rodents as part of its management and surveillance activities.

As a general policy, staff may not recommend people to private rodent control companies, but staff may educate the public about what kind of company to hire and how to avoid pests. The program also requires that every complaint be addressed within 72 hours.

## Public Education and Partnerships

The Rodent and Vector Control Division does not have a rodent-specific communications plan, but an agency-wide communications plan exists. Using printed media, TV, and radio, the program distributes information through schools and public and private partners. The program develops materials and resources for different communication channels and audiences, such as for non-English speaking populations. The program provides information to the public on its website. The program's primary goal is to educate people and change behavior to mitigate the causes of rodent activity, thereby improving public health.

The Rodent and Vector Control Division works with the DC Department of Public Works to provide public, live Web chats or "Rat Summits" to discuss how residents can control the rodent population through proper sanitation. In addition, the program partners with the National Park Service, commissioners, and city leaders to solicit input on key decisions. Such interagency communication ensures a citywide enforcement structure in which each agency participates in achieving neighborhood goals for cleanliness, safety, and healthy environments. For example, the program alerts the health department's Food Protection Program of specific areas where waste food sources contribute to rodent activity in residential neighborhoods or commercial neighborhoods. The Food Protection Program initiates enforcement at food establishments if needed.



*Photo courtesy of the Government of the District of Columbia Department of Health*



## Policies and Regulations

The program has numerous laws and regulations, internal handbooks, and standards of practice. The program's operational plans include the daily functions of pest controllers and code enforcement officers. Regulations related to rodent control include Health Nuisances Regulations, Health Nuisances-Rodent Control Regulations, Litter Control Administration Regulations, and Rodent Control Infractions Regulations. In 2000, code enforcement legislation established initial civil penalties for conditions conducive to the proliferation of the rodent population. The program reviews all laws and regulations related to rodent control as needed. For example, the program recently updated rodent regulations to include more residential enforcement. The program makes an effort to educate and inform the public about any changes in laws or regulations. The program has strict commercial enforcement power but limited residential enforcement power. Other agencies have cross-jurisdictional authorities for code enforcement; for example, the Department of Public Works enforces sanitation violations that encourage rodents.

## Rodent Control Program Workforce

Processes exist to ensure all employees have the proper licenses and certifications. All pest controllers are licensed and maintain those licenses every three years. The program also provides in-house training, such as GIS training, and opportunities for external training and continuing education. The program's internal performance management plan describes positions, capacities, performance, and evaluation of performance. Program staff incorporate and apply newly identified best practices acquired from attending national and international seminars and reading pest management literature.

## Evaluation and Research

An evaluation plan measures program performance, effectiveness, stakeholder satisfaction, and whether the process has improved quality of services. The program has observed a decline in the number of complaints as a result of new trash bins, increase in code enforcement, increase in pest control services, and IPM. The program conducts research with consultants and research organizations. This research focuses on general rodent control practices and recommendations. Staff also attend educational seminars on reducing rodent activity.

## Conclusion

Challenges for the program involve the issue of federal land versus city land in Washington, DC. Approximately 42% of the land in the district is federal land. The federal government has an entirely different approach to rodent control, which also impacts the city. The program has been working with the Department of the Interior to coordinate a federal-state approach to rodent control. Additionally, the health department faces challenges in educating the public about the causes of rodent activity. Staff also strongly believe that numerous city agencies, in addition to the health department, should control the causes of rodent activity. However, staff lack guidance and best practices on how to implement and successfully maintain interagency or interdepartmental urban strategic planning for rodent control. Overall, the Rodent and Vector Control Division has a very comprehensive rodent control program geared toward understanding the patterns of rodent behavior, not just extermination.

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