



Testimony

of

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before the

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Committee on Health

regarding

Oversight Hearing: The Department of Health and Mental Hygiene's Rodent Control
Strategy

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Good afternoon, Chairperson Rivera and members of the New York City Council Health Committee. I am Dr. Edgar Butts, Assistant Commissioner for Veterinary and Pest Control Services (PCS) for the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH). Sitting with me are Dr. Robert Corrigan, our resident rodentologist and Daniel Kass, Assistant Commissioner of Environmental Science and Policy. On behalf of Commissioner Thomas Frieden, thank you for this opportunity to testify.

The mission of PCS is to maintain both the public health and quality of life of New York City residents by using our authority under the City's Health Code to reduce rat populations. PCS has three primary roles in the control of rats: first, to identify rodent problems and their source; second, to enforce the remediation of rodent infestation by property owners; and finally, to conduct outreach and education to promote the reduction of rats through better management of property and environmental factors that contribute to increases in rodents.

Rodent control has been a challenge in New York City since colonial times, and continues to be a top priority for DOHMH. Controlling rodent infestation is a complex issue involving garbage handling, infrastructure and housing quality, individual human behavior, rodent population cycles and the natural environment. Rodent control can only be effective when the source of the infestation is identified and eliminated along with available food, water, and shelter. Traditionally, PCS has identified and responded to rodent problems through individual complaints from NYC residents. Today, because of the ease of reporting rodent sightings through 311, the number of complaints has increased from about 15,000 annually to approximately 25,000 annually since 2004. As we continue to strive to improve the effectiveness of the rodent control program, with the use of new technology and analytical tools, we are moving away from a complaint-based system to proactively holding private property owners and other city agencies accountable and involving communities more directly in addressing the causes of rodent infestation.

I would like to acknowledge the importance of Council funding last year in helping to launch many of the efforts undertaken by DOHMH. The Council's support enabled us to purchase handheld devices and vehicles, enhance our baiting program, begin to build a new data system to help better manage the program, and to develop the Rat Information Portal. In these difficult fiscal times, all the city's programs are working hard to improve efficiency and meet increasing needs with limited funding. We will continue to maximize available resources for efficient rodent management and work collaboratively inside and outside of government to promote policies and initiatives that will encourage the reduction of rats in our city.

The Bureau of Pest Control Services conducts inspections, issues abatement orders, checks compliance with violations notices, safely places rodent bait and removes garbage and debris from properties with violations when property owners fail to do so in a timely manner. If our first inspection detects signs of rats, the owner is identified and issued a

Commissioner's Order to Abate with a copy of the inspection results notifying the owner to correct the conditions that are attracting or harboring rodents, and exterminate within five days. We conduct a follow-up compliance inspection shortly thereafter. If conditions have not improved, the property owner is issued a Notice of Violation (NOV). If a property owner again does not correct the violation, PCS may then apply rodenticides and/or clean the property, and charge the owner for the service. The property owner then receives notification that the DOHMH Administrative Health Tribunal may issue fines in a civil proceeding.

PCS collaborates with 19 governmental agencies through the Rodent Task Force to monitor and control rodent problems throughout the City. The Task Force uses a proactive and effective approach to enhance interagency cooperation for solving rodent problems, including identifying high-risk areas and conducting activity to reduce rodent activity in these areas through multiagency intervention. Our NYC Rodent Academy Program has also trained over 1,000 City Agency employees in integrated pest management and best practices. The program and its curriculum was developed and is taught by Dr. Robert Corrigan.

PCS handles a large volume of rodent control cases quickly and effectively. More than 80,000 inspections and 60,000 rodenticide applications were conducted in FY08. More critical complaints, such as rodent bites or severe rat infestations, are addressed within 24 hours. Complaints about properties owned by governmental agencies are generally referred directly to the owning or managing agency, but when the PCS does find violations in public property, we notify the agency so it can remove the violations. This complaint-driven approach is successful from a customer service perspective and for improving individual properties, but rarely achieves the degree of sustained activity in any one area necessary to significantly and permanently reduce the number of rats.

The centerpiece of our proactive strategy is the Rodent Indexing Program, being piloted in the Bronx, launched in December 2007. This program is based on the concept that rats rarely inhabit a single property – rather, they occupy entire blocks or larger areas – and that when properties are addressed simultaneously, the effectiveness of the efforts will be enhanced. This program is very different than past efforts because it is based on the collection and analysis of data throughout the process.

In the Rodent Indexing Program pilot, we identified about two-thirds of the Bronx with historically higher complaints of rats. All properties in this target area were inspected once during the first six months of the project and are being inspected a second time for signs of rats and conditions that contribute to rats. Our staff uses handheld computers to facilitate new data collection and analysis methods, and speed both inspections and our ability to mail notices of findings to property owners. Bronx property owners have received enhanced inspection reports, and a copy of a detailed guide on how to rid properties of rats. Since the program began, the PCS has inspected more than 61,000 inspections. This number is compared to 25,000 properties in the rest of the city during the same period of time. Where owners fail to comply, we now apply bait on up to four visits on each property. The preliminary results of this program have been very

encouraging. We found that in the six months between the first and second rounds of inspections, the percentage of properties that have signs of rats fell by 35% -- from 8.5% in the first round, to 5.5% in the second. In addition, owners have been more likely to successfully comply with our orders in the Bronx than in the rest of the City. So far, 75% of the properties that were identified with rodent problems in the first round no longer had problems in the second round.

We have increased our efforts to educate owners and other community members as part of the indexing program in the Bronx. This work has included:

- Periodic meetings with elected officials, including the Council's Bronx delegation;
- Meetings with Bronx community boards and community-based organizations for regular updates on our progress;
- Wide distribution of a guide on preventing rats;
- A series of one day training sessions on rat management for Bronx-based landlords and building superintendents;
- Distribution of rodent-resistant trash cans;
- Assisting the Parks Department in rodent management in parks, including more extensive and regular baiting of parks; and
- The launch of our Rat Information Portal (<http://nyc.gov/rats>).

Thank you for the opportunity to address this important issue, and for your continued support for our rodent management efforts. At this time, we would like to give you a brief presentation of our latest technology – our handheld inspection system and the Rodent Information Portal. We have received excellent feedback regarding the Portal. Following the presentation, I would be happy to answer your questions.