

# Population Rodentsity

## What is the District Doing to Combat Rats!?

BY NATASHA ABBAS

Last year, Alex and Allison Hery decided they didn't really need a car. But that was only after rodents in the alley behind their home on the 1700 block of Euclid Street, NW, had taken up residence in the engine of their car, gnawing and destroying much of the wiring, including the starter and part of the brakes. "We would open up our hood and see the feathers, newspapers and candy wrappers they'd brought in for their nests," describes Mrs. Hery. After spending a great deal of money and time fixing the car and trying to beat the rats, the Herys decided to

sell their car and car share through Zip Car instead. "I'd be driving away, and rats would be jumping out of the engine hood, like they were jumping off a shipwreck, except more disgusting," she describes.

Just a few blocks away in Adams Morgan, the rodent situation has escalated to the point of a public health hazard, according to neighbors of two interconnected apartment buildings at 2401 and 2359 Ontario Road, NW. In fact, a meeting was called on May 25 with neighbors, property managers and representatives from Housing Counseling Services, the Department of Health, Rodent Control, Department of Public Works, Advisory Neighborhood Commission 1C and other city officials to address the situation.

At the meeting, Brian Koker, president of the Philadelphia-based development company that owns the building, said he had already paid the city over \$20,000 in sanitation violation fines, and he could not afford the suggested rodent abatement measure of replacing the dirt pathways behind the building with concrete pads. "To be honest with you, this isn't a bottomless pit of money in terms of how much money we have to spend on this...we are spending a fortune in six-day-a-week trash pick up...We don't have the money to do concrete pads here and all the wonderful things you are suggesting."

Mike Simpson of the property management firm for the building, on the other hand, expressed frustration that tenants refused to properly dispose their trash inside the dumpster and that the yard behind the apartment buildings had become a neighborhood dumping ground for bulk trash.

Marian Siegel, executive director of Housing Counseling Services, also attended the meeting and said she could

understand why tenants wouldn't comply. "I'm a very responsible person, and under no situation would I enter that area to throw my trash out when there are 30 rats there," she said, offering the theory that tenants would respect the property if they felt their right to adequate living conditions was also being respected.

This Adams Morgan case is not unique. In January of this year alone, the District government received 1,215 residential rodent control service requests, which doesn't account for businesses, commercial properties or residents who chose not to contact the city about rodent problems. But what is the city doing about the problem in Ward 1 where rats seem to be on permanent holiday? How much can be expected to change?

### District Introduces New Rodent Control Initiatives

For those who may think that rats are a part of life in DC, Gerard Brown – program manager of the DC Department of Health's Rodent Control Division – assures residents that the District is working to change that and has launched a new rodent abatement initiative called the Community Hygiene Pilot Program.

The pilot program, an initiative of the Departments of Health and of Public Works, was implemented earlier this year in the Dupont Circle area and will target the Adams Morgan, Mount Pleasant, and U Street neighborhoods next, says Brown. "They won't be the only areas we'll target, but they have the prime components we need in place to make this successful," he says, explaining the areas are mixed commercial and residential districts, situations that tend to be hot spots for rodents.

The goal of the initiative is to change behaviors of residents and business owners to learn proper sanitation techniques through public outreach and education, multi-agency coordination, proactive inspections, enforcement of city codes and cooperative partnerships between government, businesses and



residents. Asked when residents can expect the next phase of the rat combat program to begin, Brown says, "In the near future."

Using a strategy called Integrated Pest Management, the program will establish a task force of government officials and community members who will educate residents and businesses in the target areas on proper waste storage to eliminate food sources for rodents. The theory goes that rats like trash and will only hang around if it's there. A key component will also be the initial inspection and investigation of exterior premises of properties and educating residents on eliminating harborage or places that rats live.

### Partnering With the District

"The only way to do it is through partnership," says Brown of getting rid of the rodents for good. "The District government can't do it alone, and residents and businesses can't do it alone."

"We want to let people know that there is a place that they can call," Brown says, referring to the mayor's call center number, 202-727-1000, through which residents can report rat activity. "We want you to call," says Brown. "We need you to call."

Once residents file a report, it is relayed to Rodent Control staff who visit the premises and work with neighborhoods to resolve the issue. "If I get a call about any rodent anywhere in the city, I'm going to do everything in my power to help," Brown, a native Washingtonian and a Ward 4 resident, says sincerely. "We also want to know about it if there are conditions that attract and support rats," he adds explaining that tips from residents about improper trash disposal on their block or an overflowing dumpster in their alley are a great help to Rodent Control staff as it allows them to identify, educate and change the

behavior of businesses or residents who are unknowingly perpetuating rodent problems.

### What If It's Your Neighbor?

For those who may be worried about "ratting out" their neighbors, Brown laughingly says, "We're not going to knock on someone's door and tell them their neighbor next door turned them in," explaining that callers who make tips about code violations will remain anonymous. Most people do not dispose of their trash incorrectly to be malicious, but often they are just not aware that such behaviors are exacerbating rodent problems and negating any efforts of the city to abate rodents, says Brown.

Another important component of the District's Rodent Control program is proactive enforcement of sanitation violations, such as leaving trash bags out without being placed in a covered bin, according to Brown. There are five code enforcement officers who are each assigned to a section of the city to conduct proactive investigations. The fine for violations is currently \$75 for residents and \$500 for businesses, but Brown says those numbers are due to increase by the end of the summer, rising to as high as \$1,000 for commercial sanitation code violations. For those looking for a little extra income, Brown also notes that the District government has a program where anyone who reports someone for illegal dumping of bulk trash will receive 10 percent of the proceeds from the fine.

There are ten certified pest controllers working within the Department of Health, as well, says Brown, who himself has been in pest management for the last 25 years. The pest controllers are also assigned a ward, and they will treat for free public space and residential properties with four or less units.

Tolaundo Taylor is one of two pest controllers for Ward 1, which has the highest volume of rat-related service requests.

Taylor said he has a good rapport with all the residents he has worked with during his five years serving Ward 1.

"Our job is to respond," says Taylor, while injecting tracking powder – a poisonous coagulant – into a rat burrow with a long white pump. He then covers the hole with dirt or newspaper and explains that is so non-target animals won't reach the poison. The rodents' fur is coated with the tracking powder when they move through the burrows, and they ingest it when they groom themselves, which they do constantly, he says.

Taylor, an enthusiastic and friendly man, describes other aspects of the job: baiting, educating residents on rat abatement tips, and distributing informational literature, which he points out is also available in Spanish. "Our biggest hope is that people will comply," says Taylor, adding "the challenge

is getting that person to get on board," referring to one or two people on a block who may be disposing of waste incorrectly.

### Construction and Rats?

Residents on the 700 block of Quebec Place, NW, a block from where construction on the Georgia Avenue Petworth Metro has begun, have recently been experiencing heightened rodent problems which some attribute to the digging from the Metro's construction project.

"I've lived here for the last nine years, and since they started digging, I've seen rats running in the streets," says Gene Beard. "I hadn't seen any for eight years until they started."

Douglas Frasier, a 20-year resident, jokes that he has been trying to find his bow and arrow because the rats have gotten so bad in the alley behind his home. "Up until last August, there was nothing," says Frasier.

Some residents decided to organize a petition to get the city to come and address the increase in rodent activity. Carolyn Matthews, who has been an active part of the process, explains that city pest controllers can only legally enter the yards and treat premises when residents sign a petition authorizing it. Matthews says that the District has been very responsive and commends pest controller Tolaundo Taylor for consistently working with residents on the issue. About the construction's impact on the rodent increase, she says, "It has contributed because it has upset their habitat, but the bottom line is we have to take responsibility for it," giving the example of leaving trash in the alley too early before pick up.

"The difficulty is not getting [the District] to respond, the difficulty is getting people to do what they are supposed to do in the first place," says Matthews, a 36-year resident of the neighborhood. However, Matthews does suggest the District be more proactive by planning for the impact construction projects have on displacing rodents into nearby neighborhoods. "Once they know a groundbreaking is going to start, they should let neighbors know right away to sign a petition to bring the city to treat the existing rats and the problem won't get worse."

Brown says that the volume of construction projects may play some role, but recent increases in rodent activity can largely be attributed to the mild winters which have enabled rodents to breed and multiply. "When we haven't had the cold winters, it steadily builds up," says Brown, explaining that cold winters act as natural exterminators. "Can we do something? Yes, but it takes time."

Internationally renowned Urban Rodentologist Dr. Bobby Corrigan says that "we are our own worst enemy" when it comes to dealing with rodents, explaining that the public is always the main obstacle for any city to achieve effective rodent control. "We are trying to clean up the food from the rats, and 25 percent of people are [throwing food in the street] or leaving out junk piles at night, or the dumpster that the restaurant purchased is cheap and its flowing over," says Corrigan, who is also a consultant for the District on pest management strategies. "Sanitation is pest control," he says. ■



Ward 1 Pest Controller Tolaundo Taylor has no fear of the dread rodents!