

RODENT CONTROL IN THE CITY OF BALTIMORE :

An urban problem we can solve.

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Author's Preface

On December 14, 1975, I opened my Sunday Sun to the Perspective Section and read the headline of the first story "The War on Rats: No Light at the End of the Tunnel." At that time I was the director of a counseling program for young people 10-14 years of age who had been arrested for breaking the law. Another column in that same section of the newspaper was entitled "Juvenile Crime: Where Court and Society Have Failed." Both articles were rather pessimistic appraisals of society's indifference to urban problems. A proverbial light bulb lit in my mind as I contemplated the possibility of training and employing youthful offenders to help win the war on rats. I started talking to kids in our program about their experiences with rats. Far too many of them had intimate experiences, having been bitten by rats or knowing of neighborhood children, frequently babies, who had been bitten. I also began talking to officials in the Health Department which then had jurisdiction over rodent control and federal funding for it. The outgrowth of these discussions was the formation of the Super Rat Fighters comprised of about twenty youth trained to educate community residents about rodent control, conduct clean-ups, and report health and housing code violations to city agencies. Young people who came to our program as a result of breaking the law were learning to enforce environmental laws and protect their communities from the threat of rats.

Twenty years later, I had an opportunity to approach the problem of rodent control from another perspective when I was appointed by the mayor to head the Bureau of Solid Waste and I became the city's chief trash collector. In 1994 we conducted an outstanding campaign of volunteer-supported community clean-ups and in 1995 we launched a new system for certain sanitation and environmental services (including rodent control) called Clean Sweep. In those two years, the Bureau of Solid Waste collected 70 million pounds more trash than in the previous two years. Solid waste supervisors were also reaching out regularly to offer their assistance to community groups and to conduct sanitary inspections for code violations. Plans were underway to make 1996 the cleanest year in the city's history by combining the successful sanitation strategies of 1994 and 1995 with a special emphasis on rodent control. The successes of the Bureau of Solid Waste in recent years are attributable to a remarkable team of managers, supervisors, crew leaders, and sanitation workers who took their mission of making Baltimore cleaner and healthier with dedication and gusto.

From the Super Rat Fighters and my former colleagues in the Bureau of Solid Waste, I learned that seemingly intractable conditions of urban life can be improved and that human behavior can change for the better in a community that supports those changes. To my friends in the Bureau and to Super Rat Fighters wherever you are, this report is dedicated.

Executive Summary

Introduction

In many ways rats are the quintessential urban problem. Citizens and government blame each other for the problem with more than a modicum of truth on both sides. It is a problem that the broader region ignores at its peril. The impacts fall most heavily on children, low-income families, and the African-American community. The impacts are largely unseen outside the affected communities. The problem is exacerbated by other urban ills - housing, sanitation, health, and poverty - and in turn it exacerbates them. A sense of futility pervades the affected neighborhoods and the agencies that serve them. All of the above statements could apply to a host of daunting urban problems including delinquency, crime, drug abuse, AIDS, teen pregnancy, inadequate education, poor housing, and unemployment. A major difference, however, is that the solution to the rat problem is within our grasp. To make the city of Baltimore relatively rat-free will not take a tremendous infusion of funding or a tremendous change in human behavior. It will require public health education, community and governmental cooperation, sustained effort, and political will.

It is terribly important that the citizens of Baltimore and their government join forces conscientiously and consistently to substantially reduce the city's extensive and virulent rat population. This paper emphasizes the public health reasons for raising the priority of rodent control among civic concerns. There are a multitude of other reasons for aggressively addressing the rat problem and benefits that will accrue from improved rodent control. The value of housing will rise for all the families who have invested their lives in their homes. A young man in southeast Baltimore, paralyzed from the neck down, will again enjoy his back yard which rats controlled last summer. Fewer babies will confront the terror of a rat in their cribs. There will be one less problem spurring people to flee Baltimore and one less obstacle to families moving back to the city. The city will be cleaner with all that means for the the pride and quality of life in Baltimore neighborhoods. And if we collectively solve the rat problem in Baltimore maybe it will encourage citizens, communities, and city government to bring the same sense of urgency and focus to other urban challenges.

Public Health Concerns

Think about how many lives would be saved if we could go back in time twenty years with what we know now about the AIDS epidemic. We have that kind of opportunity now to avert catastrophe with what we know about the epidemic potential of rat-borne diseases. Dr. Rita Colwell, president of the University of Maryland Biotechnology Institute, recently sounded the alarm in a speech about the persistence and mutability of viruses; she said, "There is no reason why another great plague can't happen again." In our increasingly smaller global village, viruses and diseases that were once

exotic and foreign can travel quickly to all corners of the world. Some of the more deadly ones are rodent borne. Rural rats in western states of this country carry the bubonic plague and cats have been known to carry plague fleas into people's homes. In recent years the plague has afflicted cities in India. While some authorities discount the possibility of new plagues or rat-borne epidemics in the United States, it can not be wholly dismissed. It would behoove us to respect the historic role that rats have played as the urban vectors of our worst medical nightmares and to do everything in our power to prevent future epidemics.

The public health case against rats does not rest solely on catastrophic speculations about what may or may not occur, rats are degrading the health of Baltimoreans right now. Leptospirosis is prevalent in Baltimore rats and is easily transmitted to humans. This flu-like disease requires hospital or medical attention in about 10% of those infected. Researchers in Detroit found that 30% of the children in an inner-city area had at one time been infected with leptospirosis. Another virus carried by a majority of adult rats in Baltimore is associated with hypertensive kidney failure. Recent research at Johns Hopkins Hospital has shown that patients on dialysis there for kidney failure due to hypertension are 24 times more likely to have this virus than the general population. Rats are known to carry salmonellosis, trichinosis, rickettsia, and rat-bite fever. They are suspected of contributing to higher rates of asthma in urban areas and they may also be one of the causes of electrical fires by chewing through wires. The total public health impact of urban rats is not known but we know enough to say that the health of the citizens of Baltimore would significantly benefit from improved rodent control.

Government Response To Date

Over the last twenty years every level of government has abdicated or greatly reduced its response to the urban rat problem. From 1969 to 1975 the federal government funded the Urban Rat Control Program in Baltimore and many other cities. The Bureau of Rodent Control, then in the Health Department, had a staff of 132 people for rodent control and sanitary enforcement. Block grant funds were later channeled through the state to the city but were severely cut in 1991. Since that time the city's Rat Rub-out Program has shrunk from thirty employees to twenty. In recent years the City has conducted a series of annual pilot programs lasting about three months each in singular areas of sixteen square blocks. Last year the housing department invested in hiring private companies for rat extermination work in Community Development Block Grant areas; it is not known if that investment will be a continuing one.

Sanitation programs seem to come in waves with each new term of municipal administrations. We've had trash bash, and trash ball, the Mayor's Campaign for a Cleaner Baltimore, and Mayor Schmoke's Clean Sweep. With the possible exception of the Clean Sweep program, when it is working the way it should, there hasn't been a holistic approach to making Baltimore cleaner and rodent-free. There is a regrettable tendency in city government for rodent control and sanitation services to become complaint driven. Services are least efficient and effective when delivered on that

basis and they undermine systematic and strategic approaches to the problem. There are, nevertheless, certain success stories of neighborhood associations working closely and consistently with city agencies to turn sanitation and rat problems around.

Community Responses and Interest in Solutions

In the course of this research over forty community leaders from diverse parts of the city were interviewed. The results of the community survey underscore the problem of rat infestation and point the way to solutions. The rat problem was described as bad or very bad in 28 out of 42 neighborhoods covered in the survey with 29 respondents saying that their rat problem is getting worse. No one surveyed said that their community had no rat problem and no one said that the problem was getting better. City agency services related to rodent control received mixed to negative reviews by the community leaders surveyed when asked about rodent control education, rat eradication, sanitation, and housing code enforcement. On a positive note many community groups described activities that they had undertaken to reduce the rat problem. More than half of the groups surveyed did one or more of the following: sale of rat bait, community education, trash can promotion, and clean-ups. One fourth said they simply referred rat complaints to the city and only seven groups said that they had done nothing to address the rat problem.

The use of trash cans in Baltimore city neighborhoods varies greatly. Fourteen groups estimated that trash can use in their communities was below 50% and fifteen groups said it was above 50%; the remaining groups were squarely in the middle. The use of trash containers with tight fitting lids is a fundamental goal of all rodent control programs. In the city of Chicago, standard trash cans were provided to all households as part of an automated system of trash collection. It has been reported that the rat population in Chicago has dropped from six million to 500,000 as a result. One hundred percent of the surveyed community leaders stated that they would support efforts to require all households to use trash cans. It is the law in Baltimore but it is not extensively enforced.

Community leaders in this survey also demonstrated a high level of self-help in regard to conducting community clean-ups. Eleven of the groups have had more than 12 clean-ups in the past two years. At the other end of the scale seven groups reported having had no clean-ups in that time. The very good news is that one hundred percent of the leaders surveyed said that they would be willing to participate in a city-wide clean-up this year with an emphasis on rodent control. In response to a request for their recommendations for improving rodent control in Baltimore, two answers stood out. Fourteen leaders suggested that more community education about the problem would be helpful and fourteen stated that enforcement of the trash can law was key. Another indicator of community interest in solving the problem of rats was the willingness of 28 leaders to serve personally on a community advisory board for rodent control; another six said they would designate a representative to the board.

Strategies and Recommendations

Citizens Planning and Housing Association (CPHA) has had a long and proud history of addressing urban problems. At its inception CPHA helped write the city's housing code and establish the first Housing Court. More recently CPHA was instrumental in developing coalitions to start curbside recycling in Baltimore and stop billboard abuses in neighborhoods. In the sponsorship of this Rodent Control Research Project, CPHA has indicated a willingness to examine community interest and the viability of collective strategies which can better control rats in Baltimore. Toward this end the organization and the City of Baltimore are co-sponsoring a Neighborhood Beautification Day on June 8, 1996. CPHA is seeking the broadest possible participation in clean-up activities throughout the city with an extensive component of rodent control community education. CPHA staff have been meeting with community leaders who were identified through this research as a core group focusing on sanitation and rat problems in their neighborhoods. A general and obvious recommendation of this research is for CPHA to continue to provide the vehicles for community leaders to come together around these problems and viable solutions.

Public health education about rats, and the diseases they carry and their epidemic potential, needs to be conducted through the mass media outlets of newspapers, radio and television. The public is largely unaware of rat-borne leptospirosis and hantavirus and the present health threats related to rats. In the course of my research I asked a number of medical experts if they concurred with this statement "If everyone knew what you know about rat-related public health impacts and dangers, we would all be working much more conscientiously to control rats." They all agreed with the statement. I recommend that issue oriented programs and talk shows feature the rat problem from a public health perspective and that we help bridge the communication gap between the medical community and the general public.

To act upon the recommendation of leaders to improve community education about rodent control, I recommend that a single piece of paper be attractively designed with current information about sanitation services on one side. On the other side should be clear information about the public health threat posed by rats and what citizens can do to control the problem. The city's law regarding trash can use should be emphatically stated and the services of the Rat Rub-out Program described. With a single information sheet of this kind, broad distribution and, more importantly, broad use of the information can be facilitated. Currently the city offers multi-page information or multiple pamphlets not easily read or used by citizens and community groups. Community newsletters and newspapers should be conduits of rodent control messages as clearly and as broadly as possible.

Another avenue for broadcasting rodent control messages to citizens is through updating and redistributing the monthly Clean Sweep schedule to all households in the city. At the outset of the Clean Sweep program the full range of city services

available to neighborhoods on their Clean Sweep day was not known. In addition to bulk trash removal, pothole repair, sewer drain clearing, tree trimming, housing inspections, and graffiti removal services can be requested and provided. The services of the Rat Rub-out Program are also available to communities on their Clean Sweep day. I recommend that the city print rodent control information on the back side of a new Clean Sweep schedule and a listing of all the Clean Sweep services that citizens can request through their HUBs. The city's trash can requirement should also be emphatically stated on that schedule card.

The City of Baltimore should use all of the funds budgeted for rodent control on rodent control with the emphasis on rat extermination. Housing inspectors, rodent control crews, and sanitation supervisors should be linked by computer so that their functions are reinforcing and non-duplicative. Currently a sanitation supervisor issuing a violation notice does not know if a housing inspector has done the same and vice versa. The investment in private exterminators for CDBG areas should be evaluated and continued if the evaluation is positive. The operations of the private exterminators should be coordinated to complement the work of community groups. Private companies should obtain and use rights of entry where appropriate. They should call in city agencies for any properties that must be entered without permission to complete 100% extermination of rats in a given area.

I recommend that the Mayor of Baltimore use the bully pulpit of that office to restate the city's legal requirement for the use of trash cans, the reasons for the law, and the City's intention to enforce it. Enforcement should follow an intensive education program regarding the importance of using trash cans and the development of ways for low-income families to acquire trash cans at discounted rates. In some neighborhoods free trash cans may need to be offered to families through the generosity of churches and businesses. At a certain point in time the city's enforcement powers should be exercised in a systematic and strategic way using housing inspectors, sanitation supervisors, and Rat Rub-out staff. Non-compliance with the law should be referred to a new entity proposed in the next paragraph - Sanitation Court.

One of the community leaders participating in this research project recommended the establishment of a sanitation court. Currently there are practical limitations on how many comparatively small cases of sanitary code violations can be heard in overloaded criminal courtrooms. A separate sanitation court could be formed economically utilizing retired judges or masters and the techniques of community arbitration. Fines could still be imposed but a greater emphasis would be on compliance and community service. If such a court could be established, a great many more cases could be handled. City inspectors could issue more violation notices and citations, and greater respect for the city's sanitation laws could be garnered. Citizens may take these laws more seriously if the City does.

Civil law actions against the owners of rat-infested properties can now be taken by community groups to redress these public nuisances. The Community Law Center, with support from CPHA and many community groups, succeeded in passing state

legislation, House Bill 421, for this purpose. I recommend that opportunities for using this new vehicle for community redress of public nuisances be tested, as soon as possible, in a case of rat infestation. The award of substantial civil damages to a community group that has suffered from a rat-infested property may be a stronger deterrent than than small fines imposed in criminal cases. A successful case of this nature should be broadly publicized for its deterrent effect.

Rights of entry are a tool of the city's Rat Rub-out program that can be used more widely with community assistance. As a general rule rat extermination on private property is the responsibility of the owner and program staff focus on public property. If, however, there is an individual or family who cannot bait for rats on their own for legitimate reasons, the city can obtain a signed right of entry and do the work. Community groups can be a great help to the city by identifying these needy individuals and families and obtaining the right of entry forms in advance of visits from the Rat Rub-out crews. This would greatly expedite their work and help reach the essential goal of one hundred percent participation.

Using the public health powers of the city to enter and exterminate rats on private property ought to be done more frequently and strategically. Some households will clean-up and bait for rats on their own; some will do so at the request of the neighborhood association; some will respond to an inspector; and some will only respond after receiving a fine. For those who respond to none of the above, I recommend that the city use its public health powers to clean-up and bait. The owner or occupant would then be presented with a bill or a lien on the property. If a community group, working in concert with city agencies, follows the strategy outlined above in a square block area, the rat problem can be eliminated. The secret to successful rodent control is reaching all of the properties in an area. If there is a single rat-infested property left, the area is in danger of reinfestation. And if all of the rats are exterminated in an area, the rats will not return for a long time. So much of the efforts of community groups and city agencies to date have been frustrated because the rodent control efforts did not reach all of the infested properties. Block by block a strategy that does reach every household will be successful.

Conclusion

The challenge of rodent control is one that our communities and our government can meet when our partnership potential is fully realized. Campaigns to rid neighborhoods of rats have been successful in Remington and Rosemont in the past, and in some areas of the city's pilot programs. More recently the neighborhoods in the Comprehensive Communities Program of CPHA have demonstrated creative capabilities in addressing sanitation and rodent control problems. The Charles Village Community Benefits District is another example of a neighborhood success story where city agencies and community efforts work synergistically to control rats. It can be done when the goal of 100% participation in rat extermination and code compliance is achieved. The recommendations outlined above are intended to take the lessons of these success stories and broadcast them to the city at large.

The public health concerns related to rats help to dramatize the need to act affirmatively, aggressively, and consistently to succeed in making our city as rat free as possible. The health of our children is literally at stake. We must overcome the cynicism and pessimism that surround so many urban problems and inhibit solutions. There are many examples of where people have changed their behaviors, i.e. stopped smoking or practiced safe sex, in response to public health education. We need to give people the information that might just be the turning point to change their sanitation habits, buy and use a trash can, or bait for rats where needed. And we have to demand that our city government use its powers to enforce the trash can law and deal effectively with scofflaws to gain 100% compliance block by block with rodent control aspects of the code.

Dr. Joshua Lederberg, a Nobel laureate, concurs with Dr. Rita Colwell in alerting us to the continuing threat of viral epidemics. He wrote in 1988 "most people are grossly overoptimistic with respect to the means we have available to fend global epidemics comparable with the Black Death." He also pinpointed the shrinking of our planet earth as a health threat saying, "The microbe that felled one child in a distant continent yesterday can reach yours today and seed a global pandemic tomorrow." The conclusion he reached from this analysis was "We can no longer be indifferent to the suffering of others." Within our own city and within our own region, whether it's the threat of rats or the threat of any of the other urban burdens that fall most heavily on children, poor families, and the African American community - we can no longer be indifferent to the suffering of others!

COMMUNITY RODENT CONTROL SURVEY

Community Group - COMPOSITE of 42 GROUPS

Date: as of 4/30/96

President/Representative mostly presidents

Address _____

Phone _____

1. How would you describe the rat problem in your neighborhood?

Very bad 14 Bad 14 Moderate 9 Small 5 No Problem 0

Is the rat problem?

getting worse 29 staying the same 12 getting better 0

2. What have city agencies done to address the rat problem in the community?

Education/prevention - the dominant answer (24) was little or none; (6) said the city had provided rodent control education; others had no response.

Rat eradication - the dominant response (15) was sometimes; there were (6) clear yes and (6) clear no answers; others had no response.

Sanitation - the three parts of question five deal more clearly with respondents' evaluation of sanitation services than does this general question.

Housing code enforcement - there were (12) negative responses and (6) positive responses; the majority had no response.

Other - One group stated it had been part of a pilot rodent control program.

3. What has the community association done to address the rat problem?

(13) groups sold rat bait; (12) groups conducted community education; (5) groups promoted or sold trash cans; (11) groups report complaints to the city; (5) groups cited clean-ups but many more conduct them; (1) boards houses and (1) coordinates with Clean Sweep; (7) said nothing.

4. Is the vacant house problem in your community?

getting worse 22 staying the same 10 improving 4 no answer 4

LIST OF COMMUNITIES SURVEYED REGARDING RODENT CONTROL

Allendale Improvement Association
Belair Edison Housing Service
Boyd Booth Community Association
Brewers Hill Community Association
Cameron Village
Carrollton Ridge Community Association
Chapel NDP
Concerned Citizens for a Better Brooklyn
Concerned Citizens of Mid-Govans
Charles Village Community Benefits District
Douglass Tenant Council
Downtown Partnership
East Baltimore Midway CDC
Eastwood Community Civic Association
Fayette Outreach, Inc.
Franklin Square Community Association
Gwynns Falls Community Association
Harlem Park - St Pius Housing
Harlem Park Community Association
Irvington NHS
Lake Walker Community Association
Lakewood Chase Community Association
Lyndhurst Community Association
Madison East End Improvement Association
Mayfield Improvement Association
McHenry - Franklinton - Frederick Improvement Association
Middle East Community Association
Midtown Edmondson Improvement Association
Mount Holly Improvement Association
New Southwest
Park Heights Networking Community Council
Patterson Place
Pen Lucy Association
Pimlico Merchants Association
Richnor Springs Neighborhood Association
St. Ambrose Outreach
Sandtown Winchester
South East Community Organization
Smallwood Street Community Association
Walbrook Civic League
Woodmere Association