

Environmental Health Services Division

401 Fifth Avenue, Suite 1100
Seattle, WA 98104-1818

206-205-4394 Fax 206-296-0189
TTY Relay: 711

www.kingcounty.gov/health

Nickelsville Rodent Assessment

Final Report, November 1, 2012

Situation Summary

The City of Seattle requested the Environmental Health Division of Public Health – Seattle & King County inspect the tent encampment known as Nickelsville for rodents and make recommendations.

An inspection on October 15 by Environmental Health staff confirmed the rodent problem at the camp. This report contains a summary of Public Health’s recommendations, followed by a detailed report of the inspection and discussion of the recommendations.

Recommendations Summary

1. *Hire a professional pest control company to evaluate the site and provide guidance on establishing an effective rodent control program.*
2. *Implement ongoing rodent control and daily inspections of all camp areas for rodent activity.*
3. *If during the daily inspection, rat burrows are found under or near a resident’s tent, move the tent to new, uninfested location and destroy the burrows.*
4. *Move the food tent and pantry from current location, where there is a large underground complex of rodent burrows, and modify such that they are rodent-proof structures.*
5. *Store food items in pantry tent in rodent- proof containers and institute sanitation procedures in food preparation and serving areas.*
6. *Laundry blankets and bedding contaminated by rodents, using hot water and highest dryer temperature setting. After cleaning, store surplus bedding in rodent-proof containers.*
7. *Remove piles of old, rotten pallets, unwanted or discarded personal items, and other debris from site. Continue to keep site free of debris on a regular basis.*
8. *End on-site composting of kitchen scraps and remove current composting bins. Instead, obtain approved yard waste/compost containers from your garbage service provider and use these for collection of yard waste and food scraps. Ideally, these containers would be emptied weekly.*
9. *Increase the frequency of garbage pickup.*
10. *Substantially increase capacity for recycling storage by obtaining a recycling dumpster or increasing the number of approved recycling bins available for use.*
11. *Ensure all garbage is stored in rodent- proof containers with a tight fitting lid.*

12. *Keep vegetation cut back around the site to reduce rodent harborage and create a setback zone for daily inspection of rodent presence.*

Residents can help reduce the rodent problem by

- *Keeping all foods out of the reach of rats*
- *Storing any food in their tents in rodent proof containers*
- *Helping keep garbage in garbage cans and keep lids closed tightly*
- *Cleaning up any food waste dropped on the ground*
- *Not leaving pet food out. Feeding pets only what they need for the day, and picking up any spilled pet food*
- *Teaching newcomers about procedures for garbage, food waste and recycling storage*

Food safety for residents

- *Provide facilities for hand washing with warm water. Make soap and paper towels available at all hand washing areas.*
- *Educate newcomers on how to set up and maintain hand washing stations with waste bucket.*
- *Keep camp residents informed about where to go for items such as soap and paper towels and emptying waste and who to notify when supplies need restocking.*

Full inspection report

Sola Plumacher, from the Seattle Human Services Department’s Transitional Living and Support Unit requested Environmental Health inspect and make recommendations to deal with the rodent infestation at Nicklesville. Residents had reported seeing large numbers of rats daily. “Nicklesville” is a tent encampment in South Seattle, located on an island of city property between W Marginal way, 2nd Ave SW and Highland Park Way SW. It was reported that there are approximately 100 residents in the camp at any given time.

On October 15, 2012, Ms Plumacher accompanied Health and Environment Inspectors Leah Helms, RS and Tony Bui, RS to the Nicklesville tent city.

The inspectors were informed that one resident was responsible for setting the camp’s 30 snap-type rat traps around the property. However, at the time of the inspection, it was reported the person who baits and cleans the traps was ill and had been out of the camp for several days. No snap traps or rodent bait stations were observed by the inspectors during their tour of the camp.

Site Observations

Rodent issues

1. Many of the tents sit on wooden pallets that are directly on the ground. Rodent burrows were observed under the pallets.
2. Established rodent burrows were clearly visible in the ground in spaces recently vacated by residents, and where the pallets had been removed.
3. Rodent activity was observed in and around the food (kitchen) tent and the adjoining pantry tent where food is stored.
 - There were rat burrows under both of these structures and there was a strong odor of rats and rodent urine.
 - One resident, who helps out in the kitchen on a regular basis, reported that rodent droppings are found in these areas daily.
 - Bread and dried goods are stored in containers to keep rodents out, when they have sufficient containers. On the day of the inspection, there were not enough containers to protect all the food.
4. Vegetation overgrowth surrounds the encampment, providing rodent harborage. Vegetation includes blackberries and some scotch broom.
5. There was a dumpster in the parking lot for garbage, picked up weekly. However the camp frequently exceeds capacity of this dumpster.
 - Excess/overflow garbage is stored, uncontained, in an area loosely constructed using pallets.
 - Rodent droppings and gnawed materials were observed in this area. Pallets in and around this area are providing harborage for rodents accessing the garbage.
6. There were only two household size recycling totes in use. The community has more recycling on site than they have capacity to store.
7. The day's food waste from the kitchen was stored in garbage containers on pallets.
 - Food debris was present under the pallets.
 - A large volume food waste is generated onsite with no food/yard waste service provided to get this material out of the garbage stream.
 - Compost bins were on site but not being maintained properly, and not rodent proof. Evidence of rodents gnawing into compost bins and rodent droppings were present around the compost bin areas.
8. There was a large amount of debris on site which is good harborage for rodents.
 - a pile of blankets and bedding

- a large pile of old pallets
- piles of discarded/ unwanted items left by former occupants
- many of the piles had evidence of rodent activity such as gnaw marks and droppings

Food safety issues

1. Food items, such as bags of onions, were stored on the floor of the food tent with no protection from contamination.
2. Limited hand washing available on site.
 - No hot water for hand washing.
 - Cold water hand washing station was located next to portable bathrooms, near the food tent but not convenient to the common eating area.
 - There was one orange insulated water container set up for multi-use, e.g. for portable drinking water and hand washing near the common eating area. However, there was no hand sink station. The water inside this container was measured at 66 degrees F.
 - There was no liquid soap and no paper towels to serve this eating area.
3. A dish washing area was set up outside of food (dining) tent. It was unclear to camp staff hosting the inspection how dishes are washed or how grey water is disposed of.
4. Food and food service items were stored in tents where there is a known rodent infestation.

General observations

1. Pets were onsite: we observed one dog and three cats. There was one outdoor dog enclosure that had wood chips and a chain link fence surround that was in good repair. There was a pet food storage area with food stored in metal cans with lids and some in plastic bins. Lids were ajar on some bins. Some residents left out pet food that could be available for rodents.
2. There were two female goats, apparently pets of a camp resident, that live in a large area in the NW corner of the camp.
3. Several portable toilets were on site. A foot operated hand sink with cold water was mentioned by residents but not directly observed.
4. New housing structures are being built as funds and volunteer time allow. These structures are elevated and built with four walls, a door and a ceiling. They are not insulated and there is no electricity.
5. There is concern among campers about the use of poison bait for rodent control. Many of the tent spaces have rat nests under them and residents are concerned about the smell of dead rodents if they are poisoned and die under their tents.

Rodent control recommendations and community practices to discourage the presence of rats and promote food safety

Note: Recommendations with an * denote items needing immediate attention.

1. *The methods of building tent sites should be modified to discourage rodent harborage, and tent sites that have become rat infested must be promptly addressed.
 - Elevating the tent foundation with cinderblocks, creating open space under the platform, would help deter rodents from nesting under tents.
 - Consider implementing a camp rule of rotating tent sites to prevent rats from getting established under a tent. If a site does become infested, move the tent to a new, clean site and destroy the rats and their burrows.
2. *Relocate the food tent and pantry tent to a new location. There is a severe rodent infestation under the floor of both these tents.
 - Food and pantry areas should be situated in a rodent-proof structure.
 - All food and spices should be stored in rodent-proof containers with sealable lids.
 - Pantry should be large enough to hold all supplies in rodent-proof containers, and be organized so that it is easy to inspect for signs of rodents.
 - All food should be put away in rodent-proof containers at the end of the day and there should be no food left out unsecured overnight.
3. *Garbage cans near the eating area should be in good condition and lids should be tight and remain on the can.
4. Food waste that falls under the garbage cans should be cleaned away immediately.
5. Garbage from the dining tent must be contained in a garbage can, with a tight-fitting lid, until it can be taken to the dumpster.
6. *Do not compost kitchen scraps on site.
 - Collect food scraps and yard waste in approved containers provided by the garbage service and have these emptied regularly (ideally, once a week).
 - Remove and discard the current compost bins that have been compromised by rodents.
7. *Store all garbage in rodent proof cans with lids. Remove the loosely-constructed garbage enclosure and replace with a sufficient number of garbage cans secure lids.
8. If there is too much garbage/recycling generated for weekly pick up, both garbage and

recycling services need to be increased and the number of recycling storage containers increased.

9. *A professional pest control company should evaluate the site and provide guidance for the best types of pest control for this location.
10. * Launder blankets and bedding contaminated by rodent urine or feces in hot water with laundry detergent and dry on the highest temperature dryer setting.
11. Cut back all overgrowth within 150 feet of an occupied area on the property. If visual barrier is needed to provide security and privacy, a fence around the camp recommended.
12. Store all recycling in rodent proof cans with lids. Current recycling capacity is not adequate. Consider increasing recycling capacity to a dumpster similar in size to the regular garbage dumpster.
13. Protect surplus blankets and other bedding so that rodents cannot get in and use them for harborage. Metal trash cans with tight fitting lids are one way to do that.
14. Store pallets and other items for use in ways that do not provide harborage for rats. One way to do that is to move the items to a new location every few days. Get rid of non-useable or discarded items promptly.
15. Assure the pet food storage area stays rodent proof and in good condition and that lids are secured on bins.

Food Safety Recommendations

1. Provide at least two hand washing stations on site: one by the cooking area and one by the restrooms. An approved hand sink station must have warm water (100 degrees F), liquid (hand) soap, and paper towels. A catch bucket should be provided as well to catch waste water. Ideally dispose of this water in a sanitary sewer system or in the Sanicans.
2. Advise residents to wash their hands after their restroom use. A hand sanitizer can be used as an add-on feature. With regard to using hand sanitizer if one's hands are visibly dirty, sanitizer may not be effective in killing germs--soap and water hand washing is a much better option.
3. Address ready-to-eat and dry food storage by keeping them in a rodent-proof container. Rats can jump up to four feet from the ground to the table and food storage shelves.
4. Use an approved sanitizer, e.g. liquid bleach solution to clean up food spills and rodent droppings. For food contact surfaces use 50 ppm or one teaspoon of bleach per one gallon of cold water; allow to air dry on the surface. Staff discussed sanitizing surfaces with a bleach solution daily before opening for food services and throughout the day as needed.
5. To help neutralize rodent droppings or other infected areas use 1:10 ratio of bleach and water, soak area and allow to air dry. Do not put anything else into this bleach solution such as vinegar, ammonia, or soap.
6. Bleach, soap, disinfectant wipes and hand sanitizer were readily available but it was unclear how consistently they were being used. Develop standards and community norms to promote

better sanitation and personal hygiene.