

## Mice infestation is a public health crisis

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For the past few years, many residents of the Clinton-Peabody housing complex have had to deal with an ongoing public health crisis – mice infestation. Residents have shown pictures of mice in their kitchens and told stories of seeing mice coming through their closets and finding mice in shoes, bags, and behind refrigerators. “The smell is so strong, you have to open windows,” one resident said.



Mice in one's home may seem to some like more of a nuisance, but families in parts of St. Louis are experiencing rodent infestations that may lead to disease and illness, particularly among our most vulnerable population: infants and children. As public health officials, we are very concerned about how these mice will impact the health of tenants in public housing projects like Clinton-Peabody. Rodents are significant triggers for asthma, which is one of our region's most pressing public health problems. Asthma is the number one reason kids miss school. Asthma attacks frequently result in costly visits to the emergency room. And asthma is particularly harmful to infants and young children. Mice infestations also impact safe sleep methods. Mothers in homes with rodents feel compelled to put their babies in bed with them if they are afraid mice will crawl into the crib – which puts their babies at significant risk. As a result, we have parents in our community beginning to choose between safe sleep methods for their babies and protection against rodents. Many people reading this might be thinking, “Can't people just keep their homes clean and set mouse traps or get a cat?” While these might help in some instances, the real issue is that landlords and property managers need to do more to address the problem.

Mice find their way into homes – older homes, in particular – through cracks in walls, holes bigger than a dime, gaps in windows and ceilings, through sewer lines and unsealed drainage pipes, and through entry holes around plumbing and oven gas lines. They are drawn to areas with clutter (like garages and basements) and dumpsters and trash cans that leak. They tend to enter buildings in the fall, when outside temperatures start to drop. Once they are inside, they rarely go back out – and they reproduce. These are all problems that can be addressed by landlords and property managers, but far too often, blame and responsibility are shifted to tenants. Tenants can and must do their part. Yes, keeping a cleaner home or getting a cat might help, though cats are often triggers for asthma for many people. But tenants should also know that they have rights. They need to contact their landlord or property manager and ask them to take action – be it sealing cracks, fixing or replacing dumpsters, or doing whatever else is necessary. And if landlords and property managers won't step up based on their own sense of morality, responsibility, or concern for public health, then our policymakers need to take action to force them to do so. State Senator Jamilah Nasheed and state Representatives Michael Butler and Bruce Franks Jr. have voiced their concern and called meetings to address this issue. Their involvement is welcomed, but we hope legislative

action will not be necessary, and that property managers will step up to address the problem. The rampant infestation of mice at the Clinton-Peabody housing complex is a public health issue that requires our housing, public health, business, construction companies, and community-based organizations to work collaboratively with tenants to address.