



# Texas health regulators overrun by "several hundred" rats at Austin headquarters

BY EDGAR WALTERS NOV. 29, 2017



On Oct. 17, Brenda Brantley, an employee at Texas' Health and Human Services Commission, was in her second-floor office at the agency's Austin headquarters when she received an unexpected visitor.

The beady-eyed infiltrator — a brown rat of the species *Rattus norvegicus* — scurried down the carpeted hallway before ducking behind a filing cabinet, employee correspondence shows.

The sight was sufficiently disturbing to health commission workers that Hugh Addington, the agency's director of cross-division coordination, fired off a note to executive leadership, detailing the intruder's exact movements before it disappeared.

“It could not be located,” Addington lamented in an email obtained by The Texas Tribune under public records law. But the rodent left a clue as to its whereabouts. “There are also droppings nearby in cube 2123,” Addington wrote.

In subsequent weeks, the Norwegian rat — also known as a street rat or sewer rat — seems to have invited its friends and family over, too. A health commission spokeswoman estimated there are now “several hundred in the building.”

The agency is facing a \$60,000 bill to pay private exterminators from Orkin for the quixotic task of trapping and killing the remaining rodents in the building. That's in addition to pest control work already undertaken by the Texas Facilities Commission.

Employees described to the Tribune seeing trapped rat corpses in office hallways. Some shared harrowing cellphone photos of the furry creatures' mangled bodies. But perhaps most disturbing, employees said, are the myriad live rat sightings.

“This is really unsettling the staff...” Lesley French, an associate commissioner at the agency, wrote in an email on Oct. 20, in which she forwarded Addington's note to Enrique Marquez and Kelly Garcia, two other high-ranking employees. (Marquez was later spotted in an Orkin Man costume at the agency's Halloween celebration.)

Garcia then passed along the email to Hailey Kemp, the agency's deputy chief of staff, as they planned a meeting on how to deal with the four-legged invaders. “Rats on [floor] 2 are a continued problem,” Garcia wrote, appending a sad-faced emoticon.

Just how serious are the agency's problems? Orkin exterminators take a bleak view. “Rats prefer to hide, given enough space, so if rats are observed in plain sight, it is likely that a full-blown infestation already exists,” reads a post on the company's website.

To get rid of them, the agency has taken the unusual step of paying out of its own budget for emergency extermination.

“While we have been trapping and working with [the Texas Facilities Commission], we wanted to take the extra step and hire a contractor to address the situation before winter,” said Christine Mann, a health agency spokeswoman.

Normally, the facilities commission would handle these sorts of issues for its sister state agencies. The facilities commission has a full-time employee licensed in pest management and, as a backup, a list of private contractors it can call for help. The health commission’s decision to hire its own contractor left the facilities commission nonplussed, emails show.

“We understand that HHSC has a bid of @ \$60K for Orkin to do something, but not exactly clear what,” wrote Peter Maass, the Texas Facilities Commission’s deputy executive director of planning and real estate management.

“Also, do not understand why a pest control contractor is being hired directly by HHSC and not routing through TFC,” he wrote.

Then there is the question of where the pests came from. The facilities commission believes the rats “may be largely associated with ongoing renovation/minor construction activities,” Shyra Darr, that agency’s director of strategic planning and policy, wrote in an email. “In general, minor construction and deferred maintenance activities often disrupt and reveal rodent issues in any building.”

Internally, health agency officials have told employees to clean up their desks, especially of food waste. An all-staff email sent on Oct. 23 to Department of State Health Services employees, who face pest control problems of their own, encouraged employees to rat out their colleagues via an anonymous tip line.