

# New Orleans' Rat Fighters Go Beyond Baiting Traps

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Marvin Thompson knew he faced a difficult task when he was hired last year as principal at John McDonogh High School in New Orleans.

"The day that I pulled up to this building, I thought it was condemned," Thompson says.

The structure, built in 1898, was sagging and leaky and missing entire window panes. Inside, students were underperforming academically.

And then, there were the rats. Thompson and his two children didn't even finish unpacking his office before they discovered that problem.

"They were in here 10 minutes, and I hear this big crash," he says. "My daughter ... is laying on the floor. My son is hiding behind the file cabinet laughing at her as I watch this big, giant rat crawl from that pipe up into the ceiling."

For a while, Thompson avoided his office. And then, when he couldn't do that anymore, he developed a system for at least avoiding the rat.

"Literally every morning, I would put my key in my door, knock on the door, just to let him know I'm about to come in because there were days where he'd be on my desk or wherever," Thompson says.

Dozens of rats were inside the school. And Thompson didn't know what to do about them — until the city showed up with a plan.

## **Small Fixes With Big Results**

Claudia Riegel talks about rats a lot. She's director of the New Orleans Mosquito, Termite and Rodent Control Board, so pests are her job, and it's a job made harder after Hurricane Katrina.

Rats are a problem in any city. But post-Katrina New Orleans offered an especially friendly habitat for the hated rodents: piles of trash, blighted homes and fewer predators. The rat population spiked.

In 2007, her staff received almost 2,900 rodent complaints. That's more than seven calls a day.

The staff would bait the storm drains of an entire ZIP code, Riegel says, but it wasn't enough. So city officials decided to change their approach and jump on a hot industry trend called "integrated pest management."

In short: Forget the rats; fix the problems.

It's a more methodical approach to rat control. City officials aren't just baiting traps; they're attacking the problems that invite the rats — and they're winning.

"Vegetation management, sanitation, some building construction," Riegel says. "A lot of it is just minor: closing up holes, taking the trash out before the last person left for the day. And from 2006 to today ... it's been amazing."

Even as the population of New Orleans has increased, rodent complaints have fallen nearly 70 percent. So when Riegel's agency landed a federal grant last year, she used the money to apply the same proactive approach at John McDonogh High School.

"We wanted to show that if you can close and deal with the problems in this type of building, you can do it anywhere," she says.

### **'They Took Our Bait'**

It didn't take long to identify, at least, where the rats were living.

They were behind a padlocked door, in a brick-walled refuge that once housed an old toilet. "And right behind that is the cafeteria," Thompson says. "So they had food and they had water. Claudia's folks figured this out."

The city removed the toilet last summer, so the rats' primary water source was gone. And before even thinking about poison or traps, Riegel's team came with caulk guns and plaster. The goal: seal the building — every crack, every hole.

"The technique of going out and just putting bait, and bait, and bait, and walking away wasn't working. And so we closed the envelope of the school," she says. "That started stressing out the animals. They took our bait. We did trapping. And all of a sudden, that school is rat-free."

Riegel's team is doing the same thing in city buildings and other schools. It has pushed for better trash cans in parks and public spaces.

The work is hardly over, though, and Thompson still has his problems at John McDonogh. The school has a massive budget shortfall and declining enrollment.

But it's been months since Thompson has seen a rat. And recently, staffers decorated the front office with the school colors. They dressed it up in a nice, fresh coat of green paint.