

# Tracks: The New York City Rat Information Portal

*[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC— safer, healthier people.*

[Narrator] Hello everyone, and welcome to the Tracks podcast, where we explore the Environmental Public Health Tracking Network. Today, we have Dan Kass, who is the assistant commissioner with the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Thank you for joining us today, Dan.

[Dan Kass] Oh, it's a pleasure.

[Narrator] First of all, New York City developed a Rat Information Portal, which will help residents learn more about what they can do to control rats on their properties, in their buildings, and in their apartments. Could you tell us a little bit more about why New York City decided to create the Rat Portal?

[Dan Kass] Well, over the last couple of years, we've been redesigning our rodent control program, from one that is largely complaint driven to one that is more proactive. One component of that is the recognition that eradicating rats depends on more than just an inspection and an order to a landlord. It really, it requires the engagement of communities in a real neighborhood-level effort to eradicate rats.

So the Rat Portal enables us to share best practices and information with a variety of audiences: residents, owners, pest control firms, elected officials, people who receive notices of violations from the health department, and in addition, it enables many of those people to visualize rat problems as something that exists beyond their own properties. So using our mapping function and our data function, they can compare findings in their neighborhoods and on their block to others, they can make maps and distribute them in community meetings. You know, New York City is blessed with a very active citizenry. We have thousands of neighborhood organizations around the city that are eager to think about how they can make their neighborhoods better and they need good data.

[Narrator] And, ultimately, what do you feel New York City hopes to accomplish with the Rat Information Portal?

[Dan Kass] Well, you know, we had two overarching aims. One relates to the Tracking Program generally. We needed to build a data infrastructure for our eventual EPHT portal, which will have data on many more environmental concerns beyond rats in neighborhoods. And so we saw this as an opportunity to get some attention, to get some additional resources to build this data infrastructure, and to really test out how people respond to more data in their neighborhood.

The other thing we really hoped to achieve is that we're a health department. We're a big health department, but we're a big health department in a big city with a lot of rats. And we can't do this alone and we know that we need attention—some of it kind of amusing

and appealing to the strange and some of it factual and scientific to really get people to pay attention to the problem and realize that we just can't do this by ourselves.

One philosophy of the current administration in this city is that good data rules the day. Good data enable people to make good decisions, and we haven't been that great at sharing data, up 'til now. So, this really was a test case for a new vision of what data could achieve in the communities and an opportunity to evaluate whether we were correct.

[Narrator] You touched on it earlier about how the Rat Information Portal was initiated prior to the Environmental Public Health Tracking Network and how it was intended for testing. Have the lessons you learned from the Rat Information Portal made your EPHT portal better?

[Dan Kass] Without question, it already has. Our EPHT portal will be launched in the next few weeks, but it'll be launched in a way that is a bit different that we had envisioned originally. The first lesson I think we learned is that there are a variety of different users. And that there are ways people use the portal that we can't really imagine when we first set out to plan it. And so we knew we needed to design a very flexible system. We needed to be able to design a data architecture that was flexible that could respond to changes that we knew we would need to make once the data goes out live. We needed a simplistic—certainly more simple than we had on the Rat Portal—map interface. Something that expected less of people in terms of thinking of the mapping interface as an analytic tool and more as a data presentation tool. We knew how important it was from the Rat Portal that people be able to produce high-quality documents for sharing in community meetings, so we invested more resources than we might have otherwise in producing appealing looking tables that can print out and high-quality maps that can be printed in relatively large formats and color for distribution. And we also knew that, when people, we learned that when people extract data from this they typically extract it without all the contextual information that comes with it and so we've learned for Tracking Portal, for example, that all of the documents produced will provide some contextual information, what the sources of data were, what any caveats are, about the quality of that data, some precautionary statements about how to interpret or not interpret the data. But, most importantly, we really validated the notion that good data really helps communities make good decisions.

[Narrator] Have you seen, within the communities, people being very proactive with the data they collect, whether with the Rat Information Portal or with the tracking Web site you're about to release?

[Dan Kass] I would say that for the Rat Information Portal we have found some intended users to be extremely creative in how they use it. Community district managers and community boards are looking and printing maps and trying to identify areas that have yet to be resolved. Some elected officials have asked us for training and presentations, and they now know that they can look up on their own, our findings and response to constituents' complaints. We don't get quite the same number of referrals that we used to

because they know what's going on and elected officials are able to satisfy their constituents by knowing more, rather than being completely dependent on an agency for telling them information. We've seen reporters, I think, use this very effectively to both advance stories about the problem of rats in some neighborhoods but also to dispel some myths where people have said the problem has gotten worse and the data that's available in front of them suggests that it may not have. So those are some examples of what we've seen. There are undoubtedly many that we never learn about.

Another lesson that we've learned in this is that the media matters a lot. So we've had a tremendous number of users. We had a huge amount of press coverage when we first launched the Rat Portal. And that's because rats are interesting and it's the number-one cause of complaints to the health department and people have a kind-of curious interest in it, it grosses people out and they pay attention to it. As we move forward with the Tracking Portal we don't expect that kind of attention. We expect to have to really build a user base for that and not have one just instantaneously appear.

[Narrator] What kind of methods are you preparing to build that user base?

[Dan Kass] Well, one of the things we're able to do is we have a user base of people for the Rat Portal and we do regular meetings in communities and we expect to at each of those meetings to tell people about the Tracking Portal and all of the other data available to them. You know, there aren't groups in New York City that exist specifically to eradicate rats. They're neighborhood associations and elected officials for whom rats are one of many concerns. And so we think that these groups will have a lot of interest in the tracking portal.

We also work with a number of environmental organizations and the city will be working with them on how to use it. We'll be training in academic centers. First, we'll reach out to the academic staff, and, later, we'll invite them to invite us to classrooms to train people on how to use it. We think it'll have a lot of utility for neighborhood needs assessment activities and grant writing and other documentation. And then, we'll be trying to float some stories to specific media - print, and television - about things that they can find out so that they can use it.

[Narrator] You had mentioned that your referrals have dropped because of the Rat Information Portal. Does this, ultimately, make your job easier or does it make your job more challenging?

[Dan Kass] Well, some referrals seem to have dropped and other questions have increased, and I have to say that our hope was that both of those things would occur. So we're pleased that we seem to be getting fewer questions asking us about the location of whether rats have been found at a particular location. That's not the kind of question we'd like to answer. But the kinds of questions that we've gotten more of are the ones we do want to answer, which is, "What can we do to get rid of rats?", "Are you willing to come and talk about rats in our community?", "We've noticed on your maps that there

seems to be a problem on this avenue, or in these blocks, or this area. What could be contributing to that?”

We’ve had a lot more interagency collaboration since the portal was launched. Some agencies are concerned about some of their properties having lit up on the map with signs of rats. And they want to know, now that there’s public exposure they want to know even more what they can do to basically disappear from our map in the future. So that’s exactly what our intention was.

So it’s put the department in a better role, a role of really teaching and guiding individuals and institutions about what they can do to get rid of rats and less in a role of just having to answer questions about individual properties, which we don’t think is the answer.

[Narrator] What were some of the challenges you faced while developing the Rat Portal?

[Dan Kass] One important challenge is that we weren’t in touch with many of the potential, intended users of the site. So, while we envisioned a role for community associations or these planning entities in New York City called “community districts” or “community boards,” we weren’t exactly sure how to engage them in the portal. And so one challenge was just trying to talk to people in advance without necessarily having a product to show them and really having to kind of evaluate what it is we think they wanted and what we thought their abilities to use it would be.

Another challenge was overcoming resistance on the part of several programs and agencies about this level of data transparency. Our own pest control program was nervous about the kind of message it would put out to neighborhoods, and, rightfully so. They were concerned that, you know, we would get complaints as an agency that we were depreciating property values in some neighborhoods. Other agencies were concerned that they would be faced with an onslaught of requests. Schools were concerned that they would be the subject of derision if the school had signs of rats. There was concerns about some of the inconsistencies in the data; you know, we, as a program, we inspect some properties but we don’t inspect others. If somebody complains about rats in public housing, that complaint goes directly to the public housing authority, and so they may not appear on the map even though they may have rats. So those were concerns that were legitimate and that we had to work through before we launched the Rat Portal. We worked them through by meeting with affected agencies. We worked through the internal concern about data transparency by really returning to the campaign pledges and the general philosophy of our current city administration, which is that we want to be more transparent with data, and we’re going to trust that people are going to do the right thing with it.

[Narrator] And despite all of the challenges you’ve faced while developing this, how many people to this date have accessed the Rat Information Portal?

[Dan Kass] The first month, we had as many as 18,000 daily users of the site. When Time magazine featured the site on its online we had a peak day of I think 80,000 users. As we tracked it over time and as the stories about the portal have diminished, we have a general user base of somewhere between 100 and 150 unique daily users, who largely gravitate to the data side of the site and a little less so to the text side of the site.

[Narrator] And, personally, what do you feel is the benefit of having Environmental Public Health Tracking systems, such as the Rat Information Portal, in place?

[Dan Kass] Well, there are a lot of reasons to do this. You know, the Rat Portal is just one of many subjects that will be the subject of our more full and robust Environmental Public Health Tracking Portal here in New York City. The principal reason, I think, to put this data out is that decisions are made every day about the environmental health of communities. Some of those decisions are intentional, and they're explicit about where to put a facility or about what to allow into the air. And a lot of decisions are made absent intent. They're made, in effect, by not making a decision. One can only know what one doesn't know when someone delivers more information to really expose that ignorance or that gap in knowledge. And I think the main purpose of putting data out there is to basically let people know what they don't know already. To enable individuals and neighborhood associations and elected officials and planners and academics to be aware that there is a wealth of information that describes communities and neighborhoods and the health of the public that they may be unaware of and that they may have yet to really envision a purpose for. And I don't think we'll ever be able to anticipate all the uses of public health tracking information, but I do know that without it, there are far fewer data available for people to really consider the impact and the meaning of.

*[Announcer] For the most accurate health information visit [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) or call 1-800-CDC-INFO 24/7.*