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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-0914

WASHINGTON OFFICE:
205 CANNON BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515
(202) 225-3376

DISTRICT OFFICE:
4144 NORTH ARMENIA AVENUE
SUITE 300
TAMPA, FL 33607
(813) 871-2817
www.castor.house.gov

June 25, 2015

Sallie A. Houser-Hanfelder
Interim Director
James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital
13000 Bruce B. Downs Blvd.
Tampa, FL 33612

RE: Attention to substandard conditions at the James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital

Dear Director Houser-Hanfelder,

I am writing to follow-up on recent reports of dead mice, rats and other pests at the James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital in food service areas. I am concerned by press reports in which Haley VA claim that dead rats falling from the kitchen ceiling of one of the nation's busiest veterans hospitals shows that the facility's pest control efforts are working. (see attached).

Recent reports have called into question how well Haley VA is maintained and I write today requesting a detailed description of problem areas as well as the plan of action to eliminate these substandard conditions. We must ensure that these deplorable conditions are systematically prevented before we endanger the health of our veterans, their family members and the hardworking staff.

I hope you will bring hard earned lessons from your previous post as the Director of the Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans' Hospital and as Associate Medical Center Director at the Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System in Little Rock, Arkansas to bear on Haley and ensure our veterans get the highest quality care, which they have earned.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kathy Castor".

Kathy Castor
United States Representative
Florida – District 14

Tampa Bay Times

WINNER OF 10 PULFIZER PRIZES

Haley VA: Dead rats show pest control working



William R. Levesque, Times Staff Writer

Monday, June 22, 2015 7:00pm

TAMPA — The dead rats falling from the kitchen ceiling of one of the nation's busiest veterans hospitals show the facility's pest control efforts are working.

That is what officials at the James A. Haley VA Medical Center said Monday in the wake of a *Tampa Bay Times* report that revealed the hospital is battling a severe infestation of rats and cockroaches.

Haley spokeswoman Karen Collins provided some detail about the hospital's "vermin control" efforts that include rat traps placed on ceiling tiles in a kitchen that prepares food for hospitalized veterans and a canteen kitchen that serves veterans, staff and visitors.

"It's important to remember that the rodents found deceased means our efforts are working," Collins said in an email statement to the *Times*.

"Patients should be confident in our efforts to ensure their health and safety. We remain diligent in our pest control efforts."

Somebody sent Haley's infection control chief Thursday color photos showing three dead rats that fell from the ceiling of the hospital's main kitchen, according to internal Haley emails obtained by the *Times*. A dead mouse also was found.

"I have ... been made aware that there is a major roach problem in the kitchen and that some roaches have been found on patients' trays," the infection control director, Miriam Ruisz, wrote in an email Thursday to the Haley "enviro team," which handles pest control at the hospital.

Ruisz said she was told workers replacing a canteen kitchen ceiling two months ago "filled multiple buckets with



roaches, dead rats and feces."

Collins said the rats were discovered by workers who were installing a new fire suppression system in the main, first-floor kitchen of the Department of Veterans Affairs hospital.

Haley then hired Visions Inc. on June 10 to provide pest control services at the hospital's kitchen areas, Collins said.

VA documents show that Visions — a Brooklyn Park, Minn., company — won a \$36,500 contract to provide pest control services over the next year. The contract has options for an additional four years.

Visions describes itself on a company website as the "largest, certified Native American-owned combination advertising agency and printing company in the United States."

Its website does not say anything about the company offering pest control services either in Minnesota or Florida.

Visions officials could not be reached to comment. Collins did not respond when asked about the company's pest control expertise.

Collins said Haley has both in-house and contracted pest control programs with employees who are licensed and certified "pest prevention professionals."

Collins said the contractor uses chemicals and "live catch vermin control" methods in the kitchen areas.

The contractor, she said, handles situations beyond the expertise of VA workers and will inspect kitchen areas at least weekly "for continued vigilance."

Contact William R. Levesque at levesque@tampabay.com or (813) 226-3432.

Haley VA: Dead rats show pest control working 06/22/15
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Tampa Bay Times

WINNER OF 10 PULITZER PRIZES

Emails reveal pest control problems at Haley VA hospital



William R. Levesque, Times Staff Writer

Friday, June 19, 2015 7:31pm

TAMPA — It's not the sort of email the infection control director of a veterans hospital wants to find in their inbox — a message with photos of dead rats found in a hospital kitchen.

Workers at the James A. Haley VA Medical Center reported "3 large dead rats that fell through the kitchen ceiling" at the hospital during renovation work Wednesday night, according to emails obtained by the *Tampa Bay Times*.

They then sent color photos of the rats to the facility's infection prevention coordinator, Miriam Ruisz, and also told her about a cockroach infestation, emails show.

"I have . . . been made aware that there is a major roach problem in the kitchen and that some roaches have been found on patients' trays," Ruisz wrote in an email Thursday to the Haley "enviro team," which handles pest control.

Ruisz said she was told workers replacing a canteen ceiling two months ago "filled multiple buckets with roaches, dead rats and feces. . . . Please let me know if there is an ongoing problem with this infestation and what is being done about it. . . .

"We could possibly end up on the news, not to mention risk patient safety."

After "patient safety," Ruisz ended the sentence with an emoticon showing a frowning face.

The infection control chief may not have know about the rat infestation until this week. But other Haley employees did. In fact, emails show that workers have been putting rat traps above ceiling tiles in a kitchen where food is prepared for veterans who are hospital patients.

From: Ruisz, Miriam S.
Sent: Thursday, June 18, 2015 2:34 PM
To: VHATAM Enviro Team
Subject: Kitchen Incident Last Night
Importance: High

All,

I was notified today (and received pictures of) 3 large dead rats that fell through the kitchen ceiling last night . The demolition contractor double bagged all of the debris and removed it from the site at the end of the shift. I have also been made aware that there is a major roach problem in the kitchen and that some roaches have been found on patients' trays. I was told that 2 months ago when FMS replaced the Canteen kitchen ceiling they "filled multiple buckets with roaches, dead rats, and feces".

Please let me know if there is an ongoing problem with this infestation and what is being done about it? Obviously if someone sent me the pictures, we could possibly end up on the news, not to mention, risk patient safety ☹. Thank you

Two Hands, One Purpose
Miriam Ruisz, BSMT, MPA, CIC
Infection Prevention Coordinator
James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital
13000 Bruce B. Downs Blvd Mail Code 111J
Tampa, FL 33612
Office: (813) 972-2000 ext 6953
Pager: (813) 201-1226

Haley spokeswoman Karen Collins said in a statement emailed to the *Times* that the Department of Veterans Affairs hospital, one of the nation's busiest, works hard to provide "the safest and best experience possible" for veterans.

"Being in a tropical, urban environment, we are keenly aware of the potential of, and continually monitor for, any pest control issues," Collins said. "Recently, we observed an uptick in reported pest-related activities. . . .

"We have developed an aggressive and proactive plan to address it."

That included recently awarding a new five-year contract to a pest control firm, she said.

"If an issue is identified, the pest control team responds to eliminate it," Collins said.

The *Times* reported in 2013 that rat droppings had been found in a Haley storage area containing nursing supplies. But hospital officials said at that time the droppings were from "old rodent activity" and that no ongoing pest problem existed.

Internal emails and other documents indicate Haley officials now face a pest problem in at least two areas of the hospital.

The first is in the facility kitchen on the first floor of the main hospital building that prepares food served to veterans. This is where the rats were found. The second area involves a smaller kitchen on the second floor at the hospital canteen, where veterans, employees and visitors can buy food.

In an email to Ruisz and other hospital officials Thursday, Ellen Tolson, who works in Haley nutrition services, said the hospital had hired new pest control contractors who "treated for roaches" on June 10. Tolson said they were going to be back at the facility Thursday night after the latest reports of problems.

A pest control contractor insisted to Tolson that he did not see evidence in the main kitchen of an active roach infestation due to a lack of roach droppings, according to Tolson's email. The email did not appear to address the canteen kitchen.

"Initially, he did not feel there was feces at all," Tolson said. "But I continued to ask him about every speck I could find until we possibly found one that was feces-like. Despite finding this possible feces-like dirt, he still did not think there is an active issue because there was no 'shine' to the questionable dirt we found."

As for the bigger pests, Tolson wrote in the email, the three dead rats and a dead mouse were "all found in the ceiling above our ingredient control room" in the main hospital kitchen.

Tolson said she asked employees who work on Haley's ceiling fire sprinklers about "rodent issues" in the main kitchen. They reported seeing, she said, live rats inside the traps.

"They told me, while working in the kitchen since June 4, they have found multiple rodent traps in our ceiling, and they also told me that they have seen 'eyes' looking back at them when up in the ceiling in the corner of the kitchen looking back toward the vending area," Tolson said.

The basement crawl space under the kitchen appears to be filthy and strewn with bugs and debris, according to photos of the area obtained by the *Times* that were taken in December by VA contractors.

Haley safety and infection control officials warned VA employees in late 2014 via email that anyone entering this basement area should wear gloves, a full-face respirator and a full-body protective suit.

Haley officials insisted in 2013 that their pest control plan eliminated any fears of an infestation.

At the time, a spokeswoman said: "The plan is working."

Contact William R. Levesque at levesque@tampabay.com or (813) 226-3432.

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