

The Scoop on Poop: Mouse infestation at the public storage unit



Storage surprise at Public Storage in

There's a dead mouse sitting three steps down from the second landing in the public stairwell at Public Storage on Park Avenue in Cranston. It's probably not getting much attention, since most people take the elevator, but it's a strong representation of what's going on at this storage facility.

When Ronnie opened his storage unit to vacate it on March 17, he found a thick blanket of mouse droppings and a liberal sprinkling of mouse urine covering everything. That included items not easily cleaned and items with irreplaceable sentimental value. "I was planning to donate a lot of this to Big Brothers / Big Sisters," he said, describing the many boxes of his son's old toys. "They can't take it in this condition - some of this will never get clean now." Ronnie wanted to come back with proper cleaning implements and clothes, but was told he had to vacate the unit immediately or be charged for an additional month. "I've had my belongings here for almost four years, I've checked on them periodically, and I didn't see any problems until today," he told *Motif*. In the frenzy of his move, it was easy to smell and taste the feces in the air, and if you stayed near any of the units we investigated, you could feel that gritty sensation in the back of your throat from breathing in something bad, unless you had the foresight to bring a mask. "We're out of masks," said the facility manager, who had been giving them to customers earlier in the day.

We found four other storage space renters whose units all contained copious mouse droppings, and one customer who told us his unit was clean. None of the units with droppings, according to their renters, had contained any food. One also housed the desiccated remains of one of the rodents.

Jim Nichols, who has a unit in the facility, stored his personal belongings while he was between apartments. Everything in his unit, front to back, had mouse droppings on it. "I don't see how anybody could ever use that couch again," he said, pointing to a brown sofa stored on its side - the part facing upward covered in droppings and urine stains. "I've been renting here for four years. I haven't checked on it in a while. We can't take this into my apartment. Why should we have to put our safety and health in danger to take our ruined stuff to the dump?" Nichols was cleaning out the unusable items because, if he didn't, he would be charged an abandonment fee. "It's been going on for three weeks for me, wearing the mask and gloves - I work at a Walmart pharmacy - but I didn't think I'd need those here," Jim said. For many who use storage facilities, it's an attempt to save belonging while between apartments or while in economic difficulties - which makes each additional fee a greater source of stress.

"If we don't they're going to charge us an abandonment fee, but it's all stuff we can't possibly use now. How is that fair?" asked one customer. **Mark Montero**, who was helping Jim move, said, "If this were my stuff, I would lose my mind. You can't use any of that now."

Local hip-hop musician **Aura**, formerly Iris Creamer, who has been profiled by *Motif* in the past (motifri.com/iriscreamers), found droppings around and inside her packed storage unit. "I'll hope for the best for the rest of my stuff," she said with concern about the droppings she could see. "I'm worried about what will be in there when I move out!"

Everyone we spoke with told us they were not storing food in their units. Another customer who wished to remain anonymous told us, "I was between apartments, now I have a place to bring my furniture, but I'm not sure what I'm going to do with this. It's just disgusting when you pay to have things secure and then they're ruined. I've had this unit for just over six months. We don't store food or anything edible here. For the amount we pay - just over \$200 - we would expect better care. My sister has a unit

toward the end of hall, and she had a similar situation.” This customer had already talked to the management a week earlier. “They said they would get someone up here to clean up and make sure mice weren’t in here. But nothing happened. I’m a very clean and particular person, so this does not feel good at all.”

The storage facility is indoors, with open ceilings that feature a metal grid to top off each unit. It’s easy to imagine mice running along the grid and dropping their spoor as they go, regardless of whether they enter the unit. In this case, a lot of mice. We asked **Tony DeJesus**, Vice President at Big Blue Bug Exterminators how an infestation like this can grow, and how dangerous it can be. “There are alpha mice, and when the younger mice mature, the alphas kick them out of their territory. They say, ‘go find your own place,’ and that’s how infestations spread like that. One little mouse can generate as much as 50 [feces] a night.” Why are the droppings dangerous? “The first thing is hantavirus, that’s in the urine and the feces. The feces you see, the urine you don’t see, but if either are dry and you disturb them or try to sweep them up, those particles become airborne, and if you inhale them they can make you sick. You can also get things like dysentery - people will get diarrhea from being around the droppings - you can get salmonella, which can make you very, very sick. The key thing is the cleaning - if you clean, you need to use a disinfectant. Bleach and water is the CDC recommendation ... you spray it down, and then you wait a while and you don’t sweep. You try to pick them up as much as you can. You’ve got to be careful, wear gloves, wear a mask, even goggles.”

“I’m paying over \$200 a month to keep my stuff here - I don’t really expect that to come with mouse poop,” said another storage customer. “I feel like Public Storage is effectively saying, if you can’t afford our insurance, and we mess up, too bad, you lose,” added another person helping with the move. “No one would agree to store items in a place that they’d assume would cause harm to them and render them unsalvageable.”

While some customers had purchased insurance offered up front, Ronnie’s attempt to file a claim met with only more frustration - the insurance only covered up to \$250 in rodent damage, less a \$100 deductible (a total of \$150) and that only for items for which he could provide both damage photos and original receipts of purchase. “It’s not going to be worth the amount of paperwork,” he concluded.

Public Storage is a national franchise. The manager on site declined to comment. Their national office, in California, said it is their company policy to never talk to the press. About anything. Cranston’s building inspection department could not be reached for comment. We asked each customer we spoke with, “Would you rent a unit here again?” No one said yes.

Additional reporting by Mike Ryan