

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Department of Health



MEMORANDUM

TO: Vincent C. Gray
Mayor

THRU: Paul Quander
Deputy Mayor, Public Safety and Justice

THRU: Beatriz "BB" Otero
Deputy Mayor, Health and Human Services

FROM: Mohammad N. Akhter, MD, MPH
Director

SUBJECT: Ensuring the Health and Safety of Occupy DC Participants

DATE: January 11, 2012

On January 5th, 2012, the Department of Health (DOH) convened relevant District government agencies to discuss monitoring activities associated with the Occupy DC sites. The following agencies were present for the meeting: the Department of Public Works (DPW); the Department of Human Services (DHS); the Department of Mental Health (DMH); and Fire and Emergency Medical Services (FEMS). DOH staff from the Addiction Prevention and Recovery Administration, Health Emergency Preparedness Administration, Rodent Control Program and Food Safety Program was also present.

As you are aware, since October 1, 2011, the Occupy movement has established demonstration sites at two locations within the District. These sites are located at McPherson Square, 15th and K Street, NW, and Freedom Plaza, 14th and Pennsylvania Ave, NW. Both of the sites are federal parks and are within jurisdiction of the federal government. Although there have been no reported outbreaks of communicable disease, hypothermia or food borne illness, as the cold weather approaches, it is only a matter of time before these issues present themselves. We must now reassess and take steps to protect the health and safety of the demonstrators, as well as District residents and visitors.

Freedom Plaza is the more organized site between the two locations, with a greater attempt being made to adhere to good sanitary practices with waste disposal and food preparation. McPherson Square is less organized.

It is important to note that McPherson Square has historically been a place where the homeless population gathers and has historically had a presence of rodents.

During the January 5th meeting discussion government staff monitoring the sites identified several areas of concern with both the Freedom Plaza and McPherson Square site. However, the McPherson Square site has some serious concerns that should be addressed immediately. These include:

Hypothermia – There is concern that as the weather continues to get colder with the winter months that deaths from hypothermia could occur. In the winter of 2010, there were 11 deaths due to hypothermia. An unexpected turn in weather could lead to a tragedy.

Improper Disposal of Trash - A recent visit to both sites identified serious concerns with the amount of trash and food garbage present at the McPherson Square site. This poses health concerns not only for the Occupy protestors, but poses a threat to District residents, workers and visitors walking through the park.

Rodent Harborage – The McPherson Square site has a rodent infestation problem that is clearly visible even during daylight hours. Several rodent burrows were noted by staff and rodents were seen inside of camping tents, as well as within the makeshift kitchen tent. Additionally, pallets and straw are being used to elevate tents off the ground to reduce some of the cold, creating prime conditions for rodent harborage areas.

Food Safety - The McPherson Square site has a temporary kitchen set up bordering K St. NW. The "kitchen" does not have any refrigeration, hot water or means to protect the food from contamination. The only water for the site is coming from two water fountains. Hence, there is no setup present to adequately clean dishes. Dirty dishes with decaying food were scattered throughout the site and it appears that there is not a sanitary method to dispose of food waste or liquid waste.

Bathroom Facilities – There are only two portable toilets available at the McPherson Square site which is insufficient for the number of participants at the site. These toilets are not serviced daily and emit a foul smell. These toilets are a health hazard.

Dumping into Storm Drains – DPW and WASA checked the storm drains on the perimeter of McPherson Square, upon receiving reports of dumping, and observed foreign materials in the drains. Not only is this against the law, blocked drains also pose a flood hazard for the entire neighborhood.

Fire Safety – There is concern that the use of candles and propane heaters at both sites could result in a fire. Use of oil or propane heaters within the tents also poses a serious threat of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Homeless Population – At the McPherson Square site, a number of homeless people are co-residing with the demonstrators. As a result, the McPherson Square site is experiencing conditions associated with homeless population, i.e. increased use of illegal substances and mental health issues.

Communicable Disease – There is concern that if a few individuals were to become ill with a communicable disease that the current co-habitation of the homeless population with the demonstrators could exacerbate the spread of communicable diseases to both demonstrators and District residents.

Additional Causes of Concern – January 11, a man was charged with child cruelty after a 13-month-old infant girl was found alone in a McPherson Square tent. The abandoned infant was only wearing an onesie (infant t-shirt) in 40-degree weather. Nearby protestors heard the infant crying and called police. Fire/EMS checked on the child, who is now in the custody of CFSA. While Occupy protestors maintain that the man in question was not part of their group, the ongoing mixture of homeless, people suffering from mental illness and protestors continues to exacerbate unsafe conditions at the sites. We are fortunate to have averted tragedy with the unnecessary exposure of the young infant.

Although a number of concerns have been identified, the agencies present at the recent meeting are working together to develop a monitoring and public education plan to reduce the risk of these concerns from developing into a major health crisis. I commend all of the agencies of the District government for doing a great job under difficult circumstances. We plan to meet again in two weeks to update each other on our work and to prepare for any potential event that may occur in the near future.

I am available to discuss these concerns in greater detail and will continue to update you as more information becomes available.

cc: Christopher Murphy, Chief of Staff

Meeting held Thursday, January 5th
DC Government Staff Represented:

Dr. Mohammad Akhter, DOH, Director

Dr. Brian Amy, DOH, Interim Senior Deputy Director for Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Administration

Colette Chichester, DOH, Special Assistant

Mark Lassitier, DOH, Deputy Director for Operations, Addiction Prevention and Recovery Administration

Heather Reffet, DOH, Performance Improvement Manager

Najma Roberts, DOH, Public Information Officer

Sandra Robinson, DOH, Chief Operating Officer

Shaun Synder, DOH, Interim Senior Deputy Director for Addiction Prevention and Recovery Administration

Dr. Feseha Woldu, DOH, Senior Deputy Director for Health Regulation and Licensing Administration

Sonya Chance, DPW, Lead Solid Waste Inspector, Ward 2

Anita Chavis, DPW, Environmental Crimes Investigator

Kelly Harris, DPW, Inspector

John A. Donnelly, Sr., FEMS, A/DFC Special Operations and Homeland Security

Dr. David A. Miramontes, FEMS, MD FACEP, Asst. Chief of Fire and EMS, EMS Medical Director

Robert Glennon, DMH, Supervisor for Homeless Services

Dr. Elspeth Ritchie, DMH, Chief Medical Officer

David Berns, DHS, Director

Patricia Handy, DHS, Homeless Services Coordinator

Fred Swan, DHS, Family Services Administrator

Site Visits (non MPD or FEMS visits)

The following is a list of dates that DC government officials, and or contractors, have visited the Occupy Sites. Additionally, DMH and Pathways, a local homeless outreach and advocacy group, have been visiting both sites on a daily basis since mid December.

McPherson Square

11/14/11	DOH epidemiological and emergency preparedness staff visited the site for observation.
11/16/11	DOH emergency preparedness staff visited the site for observation.
11/17/11	A DOH APRA staff member visited site and distributed literature.
11/18/11	DOH emergency preparedness staff visited the site for observation.
11/18/11	A DOH APRA staff member visited site and distributed literature.
11/21/11	DOH emergency preparedness staff visited the site for observation.
11/23/11	DOH emergency preparedness staff visited the site for observation.
11/30/11	A DOH APRA staff member visited site and distributed literature.
11/28/11	A DPW staff member visited the site in response to a complaint from the National Park Service regarding a rat infested tree.
11/28/11	DOH emergency preparedness staff visited the site for observation.
11/30/11	DOH emergency preparedness staff visited the site for observation.
12/01/11	DOH's Rodent Control Program Manager visited the site in response to a complaint from the National Park Service regarding a rat infested tree.
12/01/11	Andromeda Mobile Van (funded by APRA) The medical mobile outreach clinic provides free medical services and referrals to alcohol or substance abusers. Individuals at the sites visited the mobile unit, but none were identified in need of substance abuse treatment. Two referrals were made; one to the STD clinic and one to Community of Hope for a pregnancy test.
12/02/11	DOH emergency preparedness staff visited the site for observation.
12/05/11	A DOH staff member visited the site to observe health conditions.
12/29/11	DOH Epidemiologist visited the site to assess medical services available.
01/03/11	A DPW staff member visited the site and discussed proper disposal of waste.
01/03/11	The DOH Food Safety Program Manager visited the site for observation.
01/03/11	A DOH Rodent Control staff member visited the site for observation.
01/04/11	DMH staff members visited the site for observation.

Freedom Plaza

11/14/11	DOH epidemiological and emergency preparedness staff visited the site for observation.
11/16/11	DOH emergency preparedness staff visited the site for observation.
11/17/11	A DOH APRA staff member visited site and distributed literature.
11/18/11	A DOH APRA staff member visited site and distributed literature.
11/18/11	DOH emergency preparedness staff visited the site for observation.
11/21/11	DOH emergency preparedness staff visited the site for observation.

11/23/11 DOH emergency preparedness staff visited the site for observation.
11/30/11 A DOH APRA staff member visited site and distributed literature.
11/30/11 DOH emergency preparedness staff visited the site for observation.
12/02/11 DOH emergency preparedness staff visited the site for observation.
12/05/11 DOH emergency preparedness staff visited the site for observation.
12/29/11 DOH Epidemiologist visited the site to assess medical services available.
01/03/11 The DOH Food Safety Program Manager visited the site for observation.
01/03/11 A DOH Rodent Control staff member visited the site for observation.