



## Rodents infest self storage unit

### Most storage facilities not responsible for rodent damage

By Mike DeForest, May 03, 2016, Florida

**ORLANDO, Fla.** - When Diane Morales stopped by her rented self storage unit to retrieve an Easter dress, she discovered that some small intruders had somehow slipped past the locked garage door and ransacked the 10-by-10-foot room.

"I basically opened up the unit, and the stench that came out of the unit was pretty nauseating," said Morales.

Mice or other rodents had chewed apart one of her wicker chairs, leaving large holes in the seat and shredded wood along the edges. The critters also deposited droppings all over the floor and on many of her boxes, including some that contained kitchen dishes.

"These are disease-spreading rodents that have defecated and urinated on all of my belongings," said Morales. "I don't think I'll be unpacking any of this. It will probably go straight to the dumpster."

When Morales opened the door to the neighboring storage unit, which is rented by her sister, she uncovered similar signs of a rodent infestation. Piles of droppings filled the floor, some clinging to a Louis Vuitton bag and the pages of a Bible.

"It's disgusting," said Morales. "It's egregious and it's disgusting."

As disturbing as it was to find her possessions covered in droppings, Morales was also troubled to learn that owners of storage facilities typically have no legal obligation to protect customers' belongings from damage caused by rodents.

The rental agreement signed by Morales says the owner is not liable for any property damage or loss caused by, among other things, burglary, fire, water, mold, mildew, and acts of God.

That includes rodents.

"Buyer beware," said Morales. "You need to understand what you're paying for."

When Morales was looking for a place to store her belongings for a few months, she chose StorQuest Self Storage on Goldenrod Road, in part because of its advertisements.

"The website says they offer clean, safe, reliable storage," said Morales. "Their tagline is, 'We care about your stuff.'"

Morales, who has lived in Florida for more than 20 years and is aware of the state's various wildlife problems, said she specifically asked a rental representative about rodents.

"I asked, 'Do you have rats here?' And she assured me it was a safe place to store my things," said Morales.

Gary Sugarman chief strategy officer for StorQuest, said the company was unaware of rodent problems at its recently purchased Orlando location until Morales discovered damage in her unit.

"(Rodent problems) are certainly unusual for us, but it has happened before," said Sugarman. "Once we're aware of it, we're on it very aggressively, as we are in this case."

StorQuest officials said the company has a national contract with a reputable pest control firm.

Still, StorQuest encourages current and future tenants to seal their belongings in airtight containers and bags, in case a neighboring tenant were to improperly store food in a unit.

"You never know who is moving in above you or next to you," said Sugarman.

He and others in the self-storage industry also encourage tenants to purchase a separate insurance policy for the full value of their belongings if the items are not already covered by existing homeowner's or renter's policies.

According to the Insurance Information Institute, some standard homeowner's and renter's insurance policies will cover theft, fire damage and tornado damage to possessions stored in an off-premises facility. However, the organization warns that those policies typically do not cover damage caused by flooding, poor maintenance, or vermin.

When Morales rented the storage unit, she purchased \$2,000 in insurance coverage, which she now acknowledges was not enough to cover the full value of her items.

"You need to check in on your belongings," said Morales, who did not visit the non-air-conditioned facility for several months, assuming that her belongings would remain in the same condition she left them.

Although StorQuest is under no legal obligation to compensate Morales for the rodent damage,

company officials told News 6 that they hope to provide her with some sort of assistance.

"We'd never be in business this long if we didn't try to work with customers," said Sugarman.