

# *The Battle with Bats*

*A public health story from...*

**Boone County Health Department**

 On a scorching August day in 2007, the Boone County Health Department received an unusual call.

"We've just found bats in our house," said the female caller, who lives with her husband, child and aunt.

Calls about bats in people's homes have doubled this past year, according to Stephanie Browning, director of the Boone County Health Department. "Hot and cold weather drives them inside."

Within a half-hour of the call, the health department dispatched an animal control officer to the woman's home. The health department runs animal control for Boone County and Columbia, and their mission was to bag the bats and have them tested for rabies at the State Laboratory.

When the tests came back positive, the department recommended five vaccinations for each family member. If left untreated, rabies is almost always fatal.

The expensive vaccine, which is stored in hospitals' pharmacies, posed no problem for the woman or her husband; both have employment-driven health insurance that also covers their child. But the woman's aunt was another matter. She, as part of the rising number of Boone Countians and other Missourians without health insurance, could not afford the staggering cost of the first shot: \$5,000 - \$7,000. Another \$2,000 for each of the four consecutive shots was even more daunting.

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That's when the health department sprang into action. "We contacted a nonprofit organization who worked directly with the manufacturer to get the vaccine through an indigent drug program," said Browning. "They shipped us the vaccine at no cost. Our public health manager wrote the order and public health nurses administered the vaccine. It took a lot of scrambling, a lot of overtime and partnering with other agencies, but we made it happen. We got this person vaccinated. It wouldn't have happened without us."

"People think we mainly do restaurant inspections and immunizations, but we take on difficult problems," says Browning. For instance, the department also provides a dental pain relief program, a utility assistance program and prescription drug assistance to help those without health insurance.

"Access to health care is the biggest problem facing Boone County today," says Browning. "It seems that more people are having a difficult time making ends meet. We see more and more people having to choose between paying for everyday living essentials and basic health care."

