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Search continues for three boys in rabid bat incident

Health officials, others partner to spread word

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Lee County officials are still looking for three boys who may have come into contact with a rabid bat on Fort Myers Beach.

Lee County Health Department spokeswoman Jennifer James-Mesloh said the health department has partnered with the city of Fort Myers Beach, the Fort Myers Beach Chamber of Commerce, the Visitors and Convention Bureau and the Lee County Parks and Recreation Department in an effort to widen the search for the youths.

According to James-Mesloh, Fort Myers Beach hoteliers and the chamber of commerce have been "blast e-mailing" their guests and members, hoping to jar memories or spread the word.

She speculated the boys could have been tourists.

"There is a possibility (they could have been tourists)," James-Mesloh said. "As we all know, we get people visiting Lee County from all over the country and the world."

Along with the expanded communication outreach, parks and recreation staff will study the pier over the next few days to determine if there is a bat problem at the location.

Vicki Little, of Lee County Parks and Recreation Department, said the department had no knowledge of a bat problem on the beach.

"We're not exactly sure if they're nesting, but we're doing some research," she said. "Park staff has not seen anything, nor have the vendors and concessionaires on the pier."

Despite a lack of bat evidence, James-Mesloh said the health department has been receiving reports of bats in the water near the Fort Myers Beach pier, where the incident originally took place.

Though unsubstantiated, she added that a theory is developing that the extreme heat has been causing bats to become ill, then they cool themselves in the Gulf waters.

"Maybe the heat is making them ill," James-Mesloh said.

Roger Clark, biologist for Lee County Parks and Recreation Department, said he would monitor the pier Monday night to see if bats are roosting underneath the Fort Myers Beach landmark.

He added that he is skeptical about the bats going for swims, but did not completely discount it.

"It's hard for me to believe they would dive into the water because it would be so hard for them to get out of the water," Clark said. "I would be skeptical of that theory, but would say it's not impossible."

According to reports from witnesses, a total of five children played with the bat, two of which have begun vaccinations for rabies.

According to James-Mesloh, time is of the essence as failure to receive treatment can prove to be fatal.

As of now, all the health department can do is continue to spread the word and hope someone contacts the facility.

"We're doing everything. We're using the resources we have available," she said. "We're even using resources of other agencies in the county."

Anyone with information on the whereabouts of the boys, estimated to be 10-12 years of age, can call the Lee County Health Department at 332-9501.