

Shelters and Transitional Living

The appearance of bed bugs in homeless shelters is becoming increasingly problematic. The transient lifestyle of the homeless population makes them particularly vulnerable to bed bugs due to potential exposure to bed bug infestations in emergency shelters, transitional housing, motels and hotels, homes of friends, etc. Outlined below are key considerations for shelter staff to consider when faced with a bed bug infestation:

Prevention

Screening

Homeless shelters and other emergency housing facilities should incorporate bed bug screening into **intake and assessment procedures**, as clients may bring along bed bugs from their previous living arrangements. Exposure to bed bugs can be incorporated into medical questions related to other public health pests such as lice, scabies, and presence of cockroach allergies or asthma. It is possible that in some cases, bites will be evident, but the client may not know or be concerned that they have been exposed to bed bugs.

Questions should be phrased compassionately, as this may be the first educational experience a person has about bed bugs. Suggestions include:

- *“Have you stayed in a place where you think you may have been exposed to bed bugs in the past three months?”*
- *“Has anyone in your family been bitten by bed bugs or do they have bites or blisters that you’re concerned about?”*
- *“Bed bugs, lice, scabies and other things can cause medical concerns. Do you need help with a bed bug, or any other pest, issue?”*

Shelter Policies and Policy Statements

If a client indicates that they believe they have been exposed to bed bugs or they know they have bed bugs, immediate help is necessary to avoid spreading them within the shelter or home.

- Provide literature to the individual or family about bed bugs and their management and prevention. Contact your local health department, the Michigan Department of Community Health, or www.michigan.gov/bedbugs for information to provide to clients.

- When placing an individual or family into a shelter, notify your administration of the bed bug issue.
- Respond to bed bug complaints immediately.

It is important to never refuse shelter to clients with symptoms of bed bug infestations. Rather, incorporate a **Bed Bug Treatment Agreement** into compliance with the shelter's rules. Refer to [Appendix B](#) for a sample Bed Bug Treatment Agreement. If a client refuses to follow procedures for bed bugs, such as inspecting belongings, laundering, or medical attention, the shelter staff may need to build this into their case plan. It would be appropriate to review shelter procedures regarding bed bugs with the client, and hold the resident responsible by having all parties sign the agreement. It is crucial to have the cooperation of *both* the shelter staff and the resident in order to most effectively eliminate a bed bug infestation.

Agencies and facilities managers should have policies in place that will help to prevent the spread of bed bugs. Suggested policy statements and reasoning for bed bug prevention include:

- Your belongings must be free of bed bugs, or you must be willing to work with facility staff to rid your belongings of bed bugs. – *This will prevent the introduction of bed bugs into our facility, and will help the resident to avoid future bed bug issues.*
- You may not bring into this facility items collected from the street, discarded items, donated furniture. – *With the increased number of bed bug cases, items on the streets are much more likely to contain bed bugs (the reason for being discarded). Therefore it is not safe to bring discarded or abandoned items into our facility.*
- If you have possibly been exposed to bed bugs, or suspect that you may have bed bug bites, you must tell the facilities manager. – *Early detection and management is very important for the control of bed bugs. Otherwise the number of bed bugs will increase rapidly.*
- The client must consult with a medical provider or social worker if bed bugs are suspected. – *There is help for clients with mental, physical, and financial needs that limit their ability to deal with bed bugs.*
- You must follow pre-treatment guidelines for a room you occupy. – *Following pretreatment guidelines will allow management to help get the bed bug infestation under control. Without cooperation control will not be possible.*

- You must not use spray, fog, or dust pesticides on your own to treat for bed bugs or any other pests. – *Foggers cause bed bugs to spread, over-the-counter sprays may be ineffective, and bed bug control requires experience to know where to place insecticides to be effective against bed bugs. Do it yourself pesticides are illegal in city facilities. Similar laws may apply to other residences.*

Handling Complaints

Bed bugs and other pests sometimes elicit fear and panic in people. Most are unwilling to live with pests, especially those that bite. However, some individuals are resigned to living with bed bugs and may be the source of an infestation in an adjacent unit or room. Complaints about pests or bites must therefore be handled IMMEDIATELY and with concern, but also with a logical approach that relies on science and pest control expertise. The typical course of events would be complaint, inspection (of one or many units), confirmation, cleaning, treatment, future prevention, and follow up to be sure the problem was handled adequately.

Designation of a pest management coordinator in your organization can streamline the handling of complaints and infestations. There should be one person in charge of overseeing the inspection and treatment process. Often this is the building or facility manager.

Encourage clients to speak openly about bed bugs and other pests and to ask for help. Be sensitive to their concerns. Use resources available to you, and gather the contact information of experts, such as your pest control company's staff entomologist, to ensure a quick response.

Furniture and Room Guidelines

Bed bugs thrive under certain conditions which are enhanced by the availability of hiding spots close to their human hosts. Bed bugs have a strong preference for paper, cloth and wood, over metal and plastic. Porous surfaces provide more humidity and egg-laying locations. Furniture choices can greatly contribute to the control of bed bugs.

Guidelines for furniture include:

- Replace wood frame beds with metal frame beds to discourage bed bug hiding and egg-laying on beds.
- Eliminate head boards completely. Bed bugs hide and thrive in head boards.

- Replace all plush furniture with metal and plastic, or items easily cleaned with soap and water.
- Adding smaller cushions that can be placed in a dryer is one way to make residents more comfortable. Cushions should be dried on a hot setting if bed bugs are an issue.
- Use only white or light colored sheets.
- Use wooden baby cribs, but choose models that are painted white. Paint existing wood colored cribs white. Fill gaps in the frames with silicone caulk. This will allow for much better inspection and reduce need for treatment. Avoid using pesticides on baby cribs!
- Vinyl-covered or seamless mattresses are recommended for adult beds and cribs.
- If vinyl mattresses have holes, consider repairing them with tape or discarding them.
- Do not discard regular (non-vinyl) mattresses, only to replace them with other regular mattresses. Bed bugs will re-infest the new bedding quickly. Use mattress encasements (see below).
- If a box spring is being used, be sure to encase it too. The box spring is more likely to harbor bed bugs than the mattress.
- Wooden dressers, wardrobes, tables and other furniture can be painted white for easy inspection. Any crevices where a credit card will fit should first be sealed
- Discard any wicker furniture. Wicker provides infinite harborage to bed bugs and is almost impossible to treat effectively.

Mattress Encasements

Mattress encasements are zippered enclosures that cover the entire mattress, as if it were bagged. Encasements should always be used for non-vinyl mattresses and box springs in bed bug prevention and management. Special bed bug-proof encasements are made of high quality cloth material, so they do not tear easily, and they have no folds around the zipper for bed bugs to find shelter. Cheaper vinyl encasements are available but need to be installed carefully to avoid tears in the vinyl. If a small hole appears, duct tape can be used to repair it. Holes MUST be repaired to prevent bed bugs from either gaining protection on the inside of the cover, or to prevent bed bugs from escaping from the infested bedding. Encasing both mattress and box spring eliminates the need to discard bedding by trapping bed bugs inside and providing a smooth simple outer surface that can be inspected, vacuumed and cleaned easily.

It is highly recommended that mattresses and box springs be encased, to preserve the sleeping area and to make bed bug inspections quick and easy.

Other Room Guidelines

- Moldings and joints around the room perimeter (floor, doors, cabinets, and windows) should be caulked with silicone sealant to eliminate hiding spots for both bed bugs and cockroaches.
- Openings around pipes or other structures that come through walls, floors and ceilings must be sealed. This will help with bed bugs, mice and cockroaches.
- People should keep sleeping in the room to avoid spreading bed bugs to other rooms or apartments, when possible.
- Residents should not store belongings under the bed when dealing with a bed bug infestation. This provides plenty of hiding spots that are difficult to clean.

Signs of Room-to-Room Spread

Often, bed bugs infesting a room or unit will make their way to an adjacent room or unit through electrical, heat and phone line conduits. It has even been documented that bed bugs can cross hallways and move between units under doors. It is important to identify cases where this happens and approach the spread from both sides of the wall or hall.

Evidence that may suggest room to room movement of bed bugs includes:

- Bed bugs in ceiling light fixtures
- Bed bugs hiding in and coming out of electrical and switch plates on walls and bed bug droppings found on the inside of the switch plates, or near ducts
- Bed bugs frequently found in unusual locations, such as the kitchen or bathroom. In such a case, it may be that the kitchen or bathroom is located adjacent to an infested bedroom or heavily infested unit, and bed bugs are traveling along water pipes.

Donations of Clothing and Other Household Items

Donations of clothing, shoes, coats, toys and other personal belongings are vital to many programs that help the disadvantaged. But sometimes when people discover bed bugs in their homes, they discard many personal belongings, and it is unclear how much of these discarded personal belongings make it to the donation stream. It is therefore important to be very careful

about donated items to avoid the introduction or spread of bed bugs in your facility or home.

Suggested precautions for donations include:

- Wash and especially DRY on HOT all clothing, shoes, coats, linens, blankets, and plush toys before distribution.
- Sort donations on a clean linoleum floor. Prevent the escape of bed bugs into your facility by sorting inside a perimeter of carpet (double-sided) tape placed around the working space. This creates a sticky barrier that bed bugs cannot cross.
- Shake out clothing; inspect books and toys carefully using the identifying guide in this manual.
- Ban all cardboard boxes for donations from your facility. Instead use clear plastic bags.
- Keep sorted and laundered items away from items that have not been checked or treated.

Treatment

If a facility is facing a bed bug infestation, the most effective program recommended for eliminating bed bugs is one that utilizes [Integrated Pest Management](#) approach. A more in-depth explanation of this approach is outlined in the [Treatment section](#), which addresses inspection, identification, record keeping, cleaning, clutter reduction and bed bug habitats, pesticide use, follow-up procedures, and awareness and education about bed bugs.

Control practices require the cooperation of both the client and the shelter staff. **Helping a client immediately with bed bugs is critical.** Help may be in the form of medical attention, laundering clothes, and isolating their belongings while a control strategy is formed. More specifically, those in need who are suffering with bed bugs will need specific things in order to cooperate in the process of eliminating bed bugs from a shelter or group home. These include:

- Instructions for preparing their belongings and rooms or apartments for bed bug treatment.
- Plastic bags for storage of belongings and clothes. Bags must be tied tightly or sealed well to prevent transfer of bed bugs into or out of bags.

- Access to laundry, particularly a dryer, to clean clothes, linens, pillows, plush toys, coats, and shoes of bed bugs. Heat will kill all life stages. Access to laundry may require money for use of a Laundromat.
- Cleaning supplies or services.
- Some may need help in the form of physical labor for cleaning.
- Emotional support may be required. Many bed bug sufferers describe post-traumatic stress disorder-type symptoms associated with the stress of their infestation.
- Access to basic necessities, such as clothes or children's toys.
- If displaced from their home as a result of bed bugs, the client may need legal help.
- A person or family with bed bugs may require an advocate to help them get fair treatment with housing, schools, and other services.

Emergency Funding

If your shelter is a recipient of **Emergency Shelter Grant (ESG)** dollars, you may be able to use these funds to purchase steam cleaners, mattress encasements, etc. in order to mitigate bed bugs in your facility. For more information, contact your local Public Housing Authority ESG grantor.