PLUS: FIRST WAVE OF ORGANIC RECYCLING REQUIREMENTS FOR APARTMENTS HITS

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UC BEDBUG RESEARCHERS GENERATED TEH WORD CLOUD (ABOVE) BASED ON ANSWERS TO THE FOLLOWING QUESTION: "WHAT MAKES BEDBUG MANAGEMENT AT YOUR MULTI-UNIT HOUSING FACILITY SO CHALLENGING?"

UC SURVEY: WHEN IT COMES TO BEDBUGS

KNOW WHAT'S HAPPENING IN YOUR UNITS

BY KATHLEEN CAMPBELL, ANDREW SUTHERLAND, VERNARD LEWIS AND DONG-HWAN CHOE

AS ENTOMOLOGISTS AT THE UNIVERSITY of California, we realized the resurgence of bedbugs in the United States provided not only a research opportunity, but a chance to help the multifamily housing industry bite back.

So in late 2014, we launched an online survey of property owners and managers throughout the state. The California Apartment Association encouraged its members to participate and help provide data on bedbug management practices in multifamily housing. CAA's call for participants helped generate 137 respondents.

While almost anyone who has experienced an infestation will state that "one bedbug is one too many," some clearly have had it much worse than others.

At the worst end of the spectrum, 15 percent of respondents reported having 21 or more infestations in the past five years. About the same number, 14 percent, reported having none. A handful of infestations were more common, with 40 percent reporting between one and five instances.

Most respondents — 88 percent — said they learned of infestations through complaints, either from the affected tenants or their neighbors.

The survey responses demonstrate both positive trends within the rental housing industry, and specific areas for improvement.

The best news from the survey is that most respondents reportedly practice some form of bedbug prevention and that most of them provide tenant education before an infestation has occurred.

The reasons for the bedbug rebound are multifaceted and include factors such as increased travel, the use of second-hand furniture and the insects' resistance to pesticides.

Prevention methods also are wide-ranging, from early detection to tenant education to the inclusion of a bedbug addendum in lease agreements. For CAA's members'-only bedbug addendum, go to www.caanet.org/bed-bug-addendum.

The addendum tells tenants what to look for, such as hitch-hiking bedbugs after traveling, and instructs renters to alert management at the first sign of an infestation.

"Do not wait," the CAA document warns. "Even a few bugs can rapidly multiply to create a major infestation that can spread from unit to unit."

Asked about bedbug difficulties at their properties, frustration with tenants abounded, as respondents cited everything from a lack of bedbug knowledge to use of second-hand furniture to problems with self-treatments.

Responses regarding self-treatments raised major concerns. Forty-two percent of survey participants said their tenants are taking a do-it-yourself approach to handling infestations, while 31 percent said they don't know whether residents are trying it. Twenty-seven percent said this doesn't happen at their sites.

Self-treatment has the potential to make problems even worse by scattering infestations due to repellent and ineffective insecticide applications. The pest control professional's job then becomes more difficult (thereby increasing the cost to treat) when what may have started as a single-room infestation spreads to other rooms or, if the population is large, into surrounding units.

Getting tenants to report infestations early allows property owners and managers to avoid the perils of renters playing amateur exterminator. But even waiting for a complaint from a tenant or neighbor isn't ideal, as it reflects a reactive approach to bedbug prevention.

The take-away message here for housing professionals is to be aware of what is going on within the units they manage. A proactive approach should embrace regular monitoring or unit inspections (with timely tenant notification) to find infestations in their infancy when they are easier and less costly to eradicate.

But when it comes to bedbugs, establishing open communication between managers and residents can prove difficult, especially if renters worry that discovery of the insects will leave them holding the proverbial bag.

Ambiguity over who bears the financial burden poses a real concern. Nineteen percent of respondents said financial responsibility for bedbug management solely "depends on the situation," while 15 percent said it should fall strictly on the tenant and another 6 percent said the costs could change from the usual responsible party/parties to another, "depending on the situation."

In multifamily housing, the insects can easily spread between attached units, sometimes making it difficult to determine when, how and where the bugs first got in, who's to blame and who bears financial responsibility, said Debra Carlton, CAA's senior vice president of public affairs.

"Owners of single-family rentals or other detached units often don't have this same problem," Carlton said, "and can more easily determine where and when the bedbug problem originated."

Last year, general confusion over roles and responsibilities in bed-bug management prompted legislative action — state Assemblyman Adrin Nazarian's bedbug bill establishing protocols and duties for rental property owners and tenants to follow when bedbugs are found. While this bill failed to move out of the Legislature, it's expected to resurface in 2016.

It's important to remember the importance of prevention and cooperation among managers and tenants. Tenants are allies in the war on bedbug infestations. Bedbugs are the enemy.

The University of California bedbug project was funded by the University of California Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources and the Western Integrated Pest Management Center.

ONLINE

- **IN DEPTH LOOK AT BEDBUG SURVEY:** For more details about the University of California's bedbug survey, including the methodology used and statistics culled from respondents, visit www.caanet.org/bed-bug-survey-results.
- **CAA BEDBUG ADDENDUM:** CAA's lease agreement addendum, which tells tenants what to look for and requires that they notify management when a bedbug infestation is suspected. www.caanet.org/bed-bug-addendum.
- **CAA ISSUE INSIGHT ON BEDBUGS:** This CAA's whitepaper answers commonly asked questions about the pests. www.caanet.org/bed-bug-whitepaper.

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