

# California Apartment Association

## California multi-unit housing managers answer bedbug survey

Photos by Dong-Hwan Choe

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In early December 2014, bedbug researchers from the University of California launched an online survey targeting California's housing professionals that manage multi-unit sites. This article highlights the survey's findings, compiled from 137 respondents, documenting positive trends within the industry as well as specific areas where practices could be improved to decrease bedbug infestations.

### **SURVEY RESULTS**

The majority of respondents were property managers (51 percent of total) or owners (41 percent of total). The remaining 8 percent were predominantly staff members within California's rental housing industry. Reported bedbug infestation levels within the last five years were as follows: none: 14 percent, 1-5: 40 percent, 6-10: 16 percent, 11-20: 12 percent, 21 or more: 15 percent. 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.

How does bedbug management differ at individual sites? Most respondents reported two attributes in common. One is that most (88 percent) became aware of infestations through complaints, either from the affected tenant or an adjacent neighbor. The other commonality was that most (72 percent) held their tenants responsible for preparing units for bedbug treatments at their sites. As for tenants trying to "self-treat" their bedbug problems, 42 percent of respondents reportedly know that it happens, 31 percent aren't sure about their tenants' pest control tactics, and 27 percent say it doesn't happen at their sites. Responsibility for management costs associated with bedbug infestations reportedly falls to many wallets: strictly on the owner and/or management (53 percent), strictly on the tenant (14 percent), "it depends on the situation" (19 percent), and on some combination of the above (14 percent).

Prevention of bedbug infestations comes in many forms; early detection, tenant education, and inclusion of a bedbug addendum in your lease agreement are some of the most common. Over one-third (36 percent) of respondents reportedly provide some type of education to their tenants, with in-person methods (e.g. classes, lectures, individual discussions) and informational flyers being equally popular. Early detection/prevention methods, used by only one quarter

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The following researchers produced the California Bed Bug study, as well as this article:

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of respondents, most often reported were the prohibition of second-hand furniture (77 percent) and inspection of units at turnover (37 percent). Another one-quarter don't use any of the above forms of prevention or don't know if they have any in place.

What about bedbug addenda? Sixty-eight percent of respondents reported including addenda within lease agreements, but what do they say? What are the most popular provisions in them? What is their purpose? To begin with, 64 percent of respondents view addenda as forms of prevention, with 36 percent having them as their only form of prevention. Researchers asked if the following items were a part of respondents' addenda (more than one could be chosen): tenants must 1) allow access for inspections, 2) report suspected infestations, 3) help prepare units for treatment, 4) be responsible for bedbug management costs, 5) subject all furnishings and belongings to a bedbug inspection before moving into unit. The most popular answers were combinations. Most commonly reported, at 24 percent of the total, was that tenants must allow inspection access, report infestations, and help prepare units. The second-most common combination (17 percent of total) was as above but included tenants shouldering responsibility for management costs. The single most popular provision (chosen by itself or in any combination) was that tenants must report suspected infestations.

The survey included an opportunity for respondents to give a personal response to an open-ended question regarding difficulties at their individual site or sites. Seventy percent had something to say, predominantly about their tenants (Fig. 1). Statements about tenants covered a wide range of topics, including poor behavior, lack of bedbug knowledge and cooperation, second-hand furniture, travel habits (foreign and domestic), timeliness of reporting, and problems with self-treatments. Others wrote of costs or the combination of tenant issues and cost. Only 16 percent named non-tenant factors as their difficulties. One respondent mentioned that their pest control company was their problem.

## WHAT IT ALL MEANS

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 (*i.e.* at the time of rental). Another hopeful sign is

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## ONLINE

**CAA BED BUG ADDENDUM:** CAA's lease agreement addendum, which tells tenants what to look for and requires that they notify management when a bed bug infestation is suspected: [www.caanet.org/bed-bug-addendum](http://www.caanet.org/bed-bug-addendum)

[<http://caanet.org/kb/bedbug-addendum-form-36-0/>].

**CAA ISSUE INSIGHT ON BEDBUGS:** This CAA's whitepaper answers commonly asked questions about the pests: [www.caanet.org/bed-bug-whitepaper](http://www.caanet.org/bed-bug-whitepaper)

[<http://caanet.org/kb/bedbugs-residential-rental-prop>]

that a few (5 percent) reported monitoring for bedbugs themselves or having it done by their pest control provider. The less-than-good news falls into two general categories: ambiguities and attitudes.

Respondents indicated two areas where ambiguities may become problematic. One is with regard to tenant self-treatment activities, the other in the area of responsibility for bedbug management costs. Bedbug infestations cannot usually be controlled using a do-it-yourself approach; housing managers and owners seem to know this, based on individual survey responses. The inherent problem may be with the 73 percent of responding housing professionals who indicated either self-treatment is occurring or they don't know whether it is occurring or not. Why? 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. A worse outcome is that the tenant, and possibly others, may be exposed to insecticides at hazardous levels. The worst possible outcome (and this has certainly happened before) of self-treatment is that the tenant uses pesticides incorrectly or illegally, with disastrous consequences for themselves and others. The take-away message here for housing professionals is to be aware of what is going on within the units they manage.

As mentioned previously in the survey results, 19 percent of respondents indicated that responsibility for bedbug management costs falls into the realm of "it depends on the situation." The actual instance of ambiguity may be even higher, though, since 14 percent of respondents chose a combination of responsible entities. "It depends" should be clearly defined in writing. Tenants will likely be discouraged from reporting infestations if they will be held financially responsible. In cases where one tenant is charged and another is not, there should be clear reasons for this disparity. Written definitions of responsibility will likely be useful in the event of litigation.

Bedbugs can be managed either reactively or proactively. By waiting for a complaint to come in from a tenant or their neighbor (process reported by 95 percent of respondents) property managers choose the reactive approach. Providing education to tenants after their unit has been infested/treated (16 percent of respondents do this) is reactive but better than not providing any education at all (26 percent of respondents do this). 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. Prevention is the first line of defense, and part of prevention is tenant education. Easy-to-understand bedbug information (and in some instances in different languages) helps tenants make better choices about their behavior and corrects erroneous facts they've been told or read on the Internet.

Only one respondent had something positive to write about their tenants. "We haven't had any problems with bedbugs yet. So far our residents have been receptive to the training we have given them." Tenants are allies in the war on bedbug infestations; bedbugs are the enemies. Certain individual tenants may not be able to help with the problem because of their own physical or mental frailties. Every building has almost as many potential bedbug allies within as it has individuals, from school children to the most senior of citizens. When

