



CASE STUDY

UNSEEN INVADERS: BED BUG INFESTATIONS IN COMMERCIAL PROPERTIES

When pests threaten commercial properties, it's usually because they have found a way inside a structure through an open door or window, crack in the foundation or unsealed utility opening. Bed bugs, however, prefer to hitch a ride inside.

"Bed bugs are professional hitchhikers and will make their way inside commercial properties on articles of clothing, purses, backpacks and luggage," said Sprague technical consultant Jeff Weier, BCE. "They can sneak up without warning, invading and disrupting even the most well-run business."

While hotels and apartment complexes garner most of the unwelcomed spotlight when it comes to bed bugs, these annoying pests can be found in a diverse array of commercial properties ranging from seats in movie theaters and doctor's offices, to the couches in a coffee shop or library, or the crew quarters on a commercial seafood processing ship.

"Bed bugs are sanitation and economically indiscriminate when it comes to selecting where they go," said Weier. "They don't care what type of commercial property they infest as long as they can find their next meal."

In non-residential commercial facilities such as office buildings and retail stores where inactive, sleeping human hosts are not as readily available, bed bugs can still be an issue.

"While it is more difficult for bed bugs to establish active infestations in offices or retail settings, clients should not underestimate how easy it is for bed bugs to be introduced or reintroduced into almost any commercial property," said Nate Cechman, branch manager for Sprague in Seattle.

Cechman has been called to inspect or treat for bed bugs on the upper floor of an office building, the x-ray room of a hospital and the seats of public transportation.

"Bed bugs thrive where they can be fed consistently and in facilities with a constant flow of people sitting for extended periods," added Cechman.

CHALLENGES

The challenges bed bugs present in commercial properties are numerous. While bed bugs are not considered a public health threat, their presence can bring not only annoyance and inconvenience, but emotional, economic, and reputational damage.

What traveler wants to stay at a hotel that has bed bugs? Would you take your family to a movie theater or stop in for breakfast at a local café that has a confirmed bed bug problem? The answer to all these questions is a flat-out no.

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Jeff Weier

Technical Consultant
Sprague Pest Solutions

Bed bugs can be found in such a wide array of commercial properties for multiple reasons including:

- **Adaptability:** In addition to bed bugs being excellent hitchhikers allowing them to be transported over long distances and into new environments, they are adaptable. They can adapt to various environments, including different temperatures and hiding places. This adaptability helps them survive and thrive in diverse settings, from hotels to offices, to public transportation.
- **Rapid Reproduction:** Bed bugs reproduce quickly, with females laying several eggs each day. This rapid reproduction means that even a small number of undetected bed bugs can quickly lead to a significant infestation.
- **High Traffic Volume:** Commercial properties, such as coffee shops, restaurants, hotels, offices, theater seats, airplane seats, and waiting areas in doctor's offices, see lots of people coming and going. This increases the chances of bed bugs being introduced on clothing, luggage, or personal belongings.
- **Changing Consumer Habits:** Human behavior also contributes to increased bed bug pressure in non-traditional locations. People spend extended time sitting on couches and chairs in a coffee shop or cafe studying or working on their laptop. This increases the likelihood that bed bugs can jump off or hitch a ride from or to you and your personal belongings.
- **Cryptic Behavior:** Bed bugs are adept at hiding in small crevices and cracks. In commercial properties, they can infest areas such as electrical outlets, baseboards, office furniture, and even behind wallpaper or picture frames.
- **Moving Parts:** Items and furniture in commercial properties are often moved around for cleaning, maintenance, or reorganization. This can disperse bed bugs to new areas within the property.
- **Lack of Training:** In many commercial properties, employees have not received training on how to identify the signs of bed bugs or communicate the threat to their pest control service provider. An unchecked infestation will increase both the size of the infestation and the likelihood that people will encounter them.
- **Misidentification:** One of the biggest challenges when working with bed bugs and clients is misidentification. Since bed bugs look like other common pests, they are often misidentified by clients.

"The stress property managers and owners feel when they think their office or retail operation have bed bugs is immense," said Cechman. "That is why accurate identification is key to providing them and their customers peace of mind they do not have bed bugs."

SOLUTIONS

The best strategy to prevent a bed bug issue is a proactive one. Early detection and following up with the appropriate control measures will reduce the risk for commercial property owners and management.

How can facility and property managers and owners reduce the threat from bed bugs? Sprague's Cechman said it starts and ends with education.

"Client education is vital to reducing the chance of bed bugs becoming an issue in commercial properties," said Cechman. "Education and training allow us to provide space for clients to become more proactively engaged in creating successful outcomes."

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Training frontline workers (i.e., housekeepers, maintenance and cleaning staff, room attendants in assisted living facilities, nurses, etc.) and tenants/residents to notice the signs of bed bugs – spotting on mattresses, bed frames and other locations where bed bugs travel or aggregate - as they go about their daily duties and activities.

Both Cechman and Weier said hotels have made great strides in this area, and it has paid off for them with fewer incidents of out-of-control bed bug infestations.

Employees should pay close attention to the seams of furniture, mattresses, drapes, and upholstery for telltale brownish or reddish spots. Vigilance in detecting signs of bed bugs by employees and tenants/residents is an important part of the control process.

Property owners and management should not be afraid to report a bed bug problem to their pest control service provider. Breakdowns in not knowing what signs to look for or not communicating potential bed bug sightings can lead to costly problems for commercial properties.

A thorough inspection stacking the effects of monitoring tools and both human and canine inspectors is critical.

Cechman focuses his inspection efforts on a 10-foot sphere (the typical distance bed bugs will travel to feed) around the area where bed bugs are thought to be present. That sphere can include adjacent apartments, cubicles, or offices so it is important to take a 360-approach to inspections.

Isolate - Bed bugs won't spread on their own unless humans help facilitate it. Isolate bedding, furniture and other items that have confirmed bed bug infestations and keep the problem localized so the appropriate treatment plan can be implemented.

RESULTS

A successful bed bug program for commercial properties is measured first by the elimination of adult bed bugs and eggs and second by an immediate reduction in any sightings by the client and their employees, guests, or residents.

Equally important however, is preventing a reoccurrence for an extended period. Establishing a preventive bed bug program includes employee education, monitoring with traps or other detection devices and frequent inspections.

"Sprague avoids the 'point and spray' approach to pest management and that includes bed bugs," said Cechman. "Inspection, monitoring, identification and education are the keys to achieving a successful outcome with bed bugs."

While the threat of bed bugs can never be completely ruled out, having a proactive program in place to minimize disruptions to commercial properties and protect employees, guests or residents is the best approach to reducing the risks posed by bed bugs.

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