

Penn State Team Urges Progress on Bed Bugs

In 2015, Megan McGinty, was at a breaking point. A regional property manager for Federation Housing, Inc., a non-profit organization that develops, builds, and manages affordable housing for senior citizens in Philadelphia, she wanted desperately to rid the 1,500 residents whom she served of the bed bug infestations that had taken root in their homes.

McGinty sent one of her employees to an “IPM in Multifamily Housing” training session taught by Dion Lerman, environmental health programs specialist for the Pennsylvania Integrated Pest Management (IPM) Program at Penn State. There, the employee learned how to implement IPM practices in the 11 high-rise apartment buildings managed by McGinty. After the workshop, Lerman continued to assist McGinty and her team in developing a plan of attack. Together, the group applied a number of practices, including a portable heat chamber to eliminate bed bugs from furniture, wheelchairs, and other hard-to-treat items.

Two years later, the housing development contains zero bed bugs. “By adopting IPM protocols, they went from having a chronic infestation problem across their entire system to having no bed bug issues,” said Lerman.

According to Lerman, Philadelphia has had a bad bed bug problem since the beginning of the century, and residents continue to suffer. “A recent survey found that more than 11 percent of residents have had bed bugs in the previous five years,” he said. “Part of the problem, is that the city does not have a bed bug policy, ordinance, or even an agency that’s in charge of addressing the issue.”

Lerman, along with Michelle Niedermeier, program coordinator for community integrated pest management and environmental health at the Penn State IPM Program, hope to see that change as they provide technical advice to the community. Recently, local agencies, non-profits, university professionals, health care professionals, senior and low-income housing advocates, lawyers, and everyday citizens established a new group called Philadelphians Against Bed Bugs (PhABB).

“The goal of PhABB is to work with the city of Philadelphia to develop and enact a bed bug ordinance based on current best management practices and protocols that would require property owners to keep their properties free of bed bugs; implement a code enforcement policy that takes infestations seriously; educate the residents and city employees about best practices for extermination; and implement and enforce policies to keep homes, schools, and workplaces free from infestations,” said Lerman. “The Penn State IPM Program is the educational arm, helping citizens of Pennsylvania to understand the importance of properly managing bed bugs.”

According to Lerman, in December 2015, an earlier citizen-based Bed Bug Task Force, commissioned by Philadelphia City Council, submitted a set of policy recommendations to the city’s Office of the Mayor. The recommendations call for a bed bug policy that

puts the onus of responsibility for inspection and remediation of bed bugs onto property owners, operators, and managers. In addition, the recommendations call for property owners, operators, and managers to provide prospective tenants with written disclosure of the unit's bed bug infestation and remediation history, and they protect tenants if they report an infestation to the appropriate city agency. To read the full set of Policy Recommendations, go to: <http://www.philadelphiansagainstbedbugs.org/>

PhABB is currently awaiting a response from the managing director of the mayor's office about the adoption of the policy recommendations. In the meantime, PhABB partnered with a local puppet troop, called Spiral Q, to create "Boris the Bed Bug," a costume that will be donned by volunteers at events around town to help raise awareness of the need for a bed bug policy, and to help educate residents about the do's and don'ts of bed bug remediation.

In addition, Lerman offers a free monthly "Bed Bug Basics" workshop that helps participants understand bed bugs and what they can do about them. The workshop takes place on the second Tuesday of every month from 5:30-7:00 p.m. at 675 Sansom Street.

In the midst of all of this activity, Penn State researchers also have created a new tool that promises to provide bed bug relief. Aprehend, a biopesticide that targets bed bugs, was approved by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 2017 and is officially registered and sold in 48 states. Lerman and Niedermeier hope to soon initiate a field trial of Aprehend in Philadelphia.

To learn more about Philadelphians Against Bed Bugs, go to:
<http://www.philadelphiansagainstbedbugs.org/>

To learn more about Aprehend, go to: <http://www.aprehend.com/product/>