

Toronto Bed Bug Project – Community Partners Report

Over the past year, community agency representatives from the Toronto Bed Bug Project have continued to tackle the issue of bed bugs in neighbourhoods, communities, various housing settings, and public spaces. In 2010, especially over the summer months, the number of bed bug sightings and infestations reported by clients, community members, and staff, were on the increase. In the last year, an increase number of requests to share knowledge and bed bug resources were received from individuals and institutions in other jurisdictions. The information provided was used for town hall meetings, conferences, and learning forums taking place across the province.

Examples of the increased bedbug profile include:

- Reports from local employment agencies and hospitals about bed bugs. Because information is not available centrally, many inquiries have come to individual community agencies. Concerns include eradication and support for employees.
- Swifter spread of bed bugs. At least two new housing projects have reported bed bugs within their first six months of operation.
- High costs for addressing bed bugs. Housing providers have had to absorb increasing costs for pest control. One public housing provider spent \$100,000 on one of its high-rise apartment buildings last year. Another community agency reported a budget of \$40,000 last year almost quadruple the previous year's costs.
- Increasing media reports attracted headlines at international festivals or called for a "bed bug czar", as bed bugs infestations continue to spread across all income groups and neighbourhoods in Toronto.

Community agencies have continued to actively provide clients and community members with information, resources, emotional support, hands on practical assistance, and coordination support to address infestations. Agencies actively responded to bed bugs in a variety of ways:

- Distributed information and resources about bed bugs, including over 3,000 copies of bed bugs information resources (Bed Bugs are Back: Are We Ready?, the Bed Bug Information Guide, and the Bed Bug Resource Manual)
- Responded to hundreds of phone calls and requests from clients and community members looking for emotional support and advice about what strategies to use to eradicate their bed bug infestations
- Provided hands on practical assistance to hundreds of clients and members of communities dealing with bed bug infestations, including de-cluttering, preparation prior to pest control treatment, and coordination of services and interventions

- Presented to the Bed Bug Summit organized by MPP Michael Colle, describing the community experience and outlining a comprehensive strategy needed at the provincial level to tackle bed bugs
- Participated in numerous media requests for interviews about bed bugs

In the coming months, the community partners will be working with support agencies, non-profit supportive housing providers, and Toronto Public Health to plan out an effective strategy in Toronto that assists vulnerable clients in tackling bed bug infestations.

It is now well known that bed bugs present a complex health and social issue. As such, there are real human and economic costs to bed bug infestations. Once bed bugs take hold in a residence or workplace, they are tenacious. Their presence takes a huge toll on those who live or work there, whether they are owners, renters, or employees. Anyone who has had to deal with bed bugs in their home or their workplace will tell you that their presence is stigmatizing. Eliminating bed bugs is a stressful and challenging process that requires adequate resources.

Community organizations, Toronto Public Health, and other key stakeholders cannot solve the problem alone. Current efforts are not sustainable for the long term. If concerted action is not taken soon, then despite the efforts that various sectors are making, bed bugs will continue to spread across the City and province, with serious social and economic costs.

We therefore, urge that the City of Toronto, through Toronto's Public Health department to:

- continue to drive and implement a comprehensive bed bug strategy for the City of Toronto.
- continue to take a lead role in distributing and sharing information about bed bugs across Ontario, Canada.
- urgently develop and initiate a broad based public message campaign.
- continue to seek the investment of other funders to implement a comprehensive bed bug response and recovery program to assist Toronto's most vulnerable citizens.

We also urge the province of Ontario to invest resources to develop and implement a provincially led bed bug strategy.

It is possible to continue to develop pro-active and innovative solutions to the bed bug problem in Toronto. But those solutions will require the immediate dedication of appropriate resources, expertise and planning. Continued leadership, investment and cooperation from all levels of government – provincial, municipal, and federal are needed to coordinate efforts; to gather, share and publicize crucial information; and to develop and implement strategic action across Ontario.