

The Human Side

Helping People is Really What a PMP's Job is All About

By Paul Bello • Contributor



A woman in her late 70s who lived alone in a modest two-bedroom house, seemed to have brought bed bugs home from the local senior citizen center.

This woman hired a pest management company to deal with her bed bug problem and with no less than three service calls occurring, she already paid about \$800. Three months had gone by, but the bed bugs were still around. At her wits end and upset, she began to cry on the phone when she called me.

Pest management professionals (PMPs) who have handled such calls know that this can happen. We empathise with bed bug victims and do our best to calm them — provide what assistance we can and reassure them their pest situation *can* be resolved successfully.

We know it's not easy — and some cases are tougher than others — but we do our best nonetheless.

What upset this woman most was her pest management company told her it wanted to perform its initial treatment protocol over again, and she had to prepare her home as she did in the past. She read me the treatment preparation instructions she had been given by her pest control company — a well-written, comprehensive list of what to do prior to a bed bug treatment.

It occurred to me a 78-year-old woman who lives alone could not possibly do this by herself.

Helping folks is really what we do in this business, right? None of us mind helping folks who legitimately need assistance — it's what we do.

Thankfully, in this case, arrangements were made for the appropriate assistance from a local community outreach organization. Volunteers showed up to help with the preparations for the treatment, and recently she called to report her home was now bed bug free. She had other concerns, however.

Mental Health Side

During the process of ridding her home of bed bugs, the elderly woman was advised to purchase and install high-quality bed bug proof mattress encasements. So, she did.

Her new problem, however, was not that she had bed bugs, but that she thought about the possibility of having bed bugs again. She was traumatized by the thought of potential re-infestation.

She was *so* concerned she planned to discard her mattress and box springs, and called me for advice on how to do that. Her fear was that if the encasement ripped during the process, bed bugs would get out and re-infest her home.

She was adamant that she needed to throw away her mattress and box springs but I reasoned with her. With no discretionary income or resources with which to replace her current queen sized bed, it seemed best to reassure her she could keep what she had. She needed to be reminded that the bed bug encasements were of high quality and durability, that they were tested to be bed bug proof and that the bugs, if any, would simply die of starvation over time.

Bed Bug Misinformation

Just like bed bugs, bed bug misinformation can be everywhere. As PMPs, we need to do our best to correct misinformation whenever we can.

Recently, I received a call from a homeless shelter located in the Southeast that was experiencing a bed bug problem. The facility is large, with many families housed within their own rooms on the upper floors. The lower floor included laundry facilities and common areas, such as a dining hall, activity room, library/reading room and television room.

At the beginning of November, it was discovered a new family had brought bed bugs in with them. The family had moved out just before Christmas because a larger, more suitable facility became available for them and the room was treated. It was then decided to leave the room vacant after the treatment to assure that the bed bugs were gone before another family would be put in that room.

The room remained vacant for nearly four weeks. The facility director thought a single treatment and four

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weeks was enough to time to starve out the bed bugs — obviously, this wasn't true.

She said she was told to place clothes, bed linens and other items in plastic bags for 48 hours to kill all the bed bugs. I could hardly believe it when she told me it was her health inspector who told her all these things.

Sealing items in plastic bags and leaving the bags in the hot, Southern sun — or with a DDVP containing pest strip — is what should have been done.

Suffice it to say that there is a lot of misinformation about bed bugs and other pests floating around out there and each of us needs to do our best to provide the correct information whenever we can.

The Worst So far

From time to time I'm asked about the worst bed bug case I've seen. While there are a few situations that are tied for second, there is no doubt in my mind which is the worst bed bug case I've visited: It was a one-bedroom garden

apartment in the Washington, D.C. metro area.

It was a second floor unit that consisted of a living room, dining room, bedroom, bathroom, eat-in kitchen and a modest sized deck beyond the sliding glass doors. Upon entering, what struck me immediately was the lack of furniture, the living conditions present and the resident himself.

The apartment furniture consisted of a dining table with four chairs and an upholstered couch. In the bedroom was a single mattress and box springs directly on the carpeted floor. The bedding consisted of a pillow (no pillow case), one sheet and one blanket. This man was sleeping directly on the mattress.

The dining room table was surrounded by just three chairs and the fourth was in the living room in a viewing position before a 13-inch television, which was mounted atop a plastic milk crate. The couch was behind the chair, but had been turned over as a result of the prior day's bed bug work performed there.

My visit was a 24-hour follow up on that bed bug work.

Physical evidence indicated that this man spent time in any of three locations within this apartment: his bed, seated at the table or seated on the couch watching television. He appeared to be about 70-years-old, but I later learned that he was in his late 50s. He was grey-haired, thin and, generally speaking, did not appear to be in a prime state of health. He spent the duration of my visit sitting in the chair watching television — which was not connected to power or cable. He just sat there smoking cigarette after cigarette.

Cigarette butts surround the legs of the chair on the floor below, as well as the floor beneath the one chair where he obviously sat at the dining room table.

Manipulating the cushions on the chairs revealed the presence of hundreds of bed bug corpses as a result of the previous day's steam treatment. The floor around the chair was littered with bed bug bodies.

The bedroom was probably worse. No area of the carpet

was bed bug free and the mattress was even worse. Bed bug fecal stains, eggs, cast skins and carcasses covered the mattress, pillow and carpet. Dead bed bugs and signs of bed bugs were everywhere.

The bedroom door was in the open position, but something compelled me to take a look behind it. This area was heavily garnished with spider webs and within the spider webs were dead bed bugs and a few German cockroaches salted in for variety. The surrounding door molding was covered with fecal stains, eggs and cast skins.

It was as if someone had a can of "bed bug evidence spray paint" and sprayed the walls to create a border of bed bug crown molding and base molding around the perimeter of the living room/dining room area. My best guess is that there were thousands of bed bugs.

The kitchen was stark with no furniture and barely any food present. There were a few dead German cockroaches scattered about on the counter tops, floor and in the

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cabinets. There were no doubt collateral damage from the day before's bed bug work.

Exiting the kitchen along the right wall was the sliding glass door that led to the deck. It was typical aluminum type door with the typical track that the door opened and

closed along. What was a tad surprising was that there were piles of dead bed bugs accumulated within the tracks.

With all the visible evidence present — the fecal/blood stains lining the walls, the omnipresent dead bed bugs, the eggs, the shed skins all that stuff — I suppose I got caught up in the moment and had to ask: “How long have you been seeing bed bugs? And, how long have you been being bitten by bed bugs?”

Much to my surprise, the man responded he had not seen any bed bugs and he has not been bitten by bed bugs.

Subsequent research revealed that this man was under the care of the municipal mental health department as one of its managed residents. He had been living in this apartment feeding bed bugs for about nine months, yet no one knew anything about it or the existing bed bug situation because he was a quiet individual who kept to himself much of the time.

The good news is that the apartment was quickly rendered bed bug free and received a complete renovation with upgrades. The man was moved to a facility where he could receive a greater degree of much needed care.

In Closing

From what we've seen it appears bed bugs will continue to be a growing problem in the U.S. Basic manufacturers and other industry-allied members are scrambling to develop and provide the pest management industry with new technologies and improved weapons with which to wage the war on bed bugs.

Even when we're treating for bed bugs, we need to remember the long term affect this pest can have on our customers — it's our job to help. **PMP**

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