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Bed bugs: LTC's unwelcome residents

Long-term care facilities are prime feeding grounds for bed bugs. Like hotels and college dormitories where many people sleep under one roof, LTC residents, visitors and staff moving between rooms and convening in common areas give these wingless insects significant opportunities to feed, spread and multiply. And bed bugs can make themselves at home in these environments, everyone who enters the facility—including staff and visitors—runs the risk of taking bed bugs home with them.

Bed bugs represent more than a quality of life issue. They can create medical problems. They cause itchy bites to human skin and can lead to secondary infections. Bed bugs have recently been shown to carry MRSA. They also cause victims psychological distress and bring social stigma. Additionally, bed bugs present reputational risks for LTC facilities.

Bed bugs thrive, in part, because they are difficult to find, even for those with the keenest of eyes. For those living in nursing homes and assisted living facilities, it may be near impossible to spot the telltale signs, especially for those whose health may be waning.

Being wingless, bed bugs' chief mode of transportation is simply hitching a ride in someone's belongings or even on clothing. LTC facilities—or any location—can be infested by someone who inadvertently transports the bloodsuckers into the building.

In a bed bug seminar for nursing home and assisted living facility executives and administrators, hosted by Bell Environmental, the audience was informed that it's not a matter of *if* a facility has bed bugs, it's a matter of *when* they will arrive. Those that take lightly the challenge bed bugs represent and the issues they cause will have bigger problems when bed bugs strike. Having a proactive approach helps to minimize issues when bed bugs are discovered in a facility.

Bell Environmental's experts recommend that LTC facilities have protocols in place to detect, eliminate and prevent bed bugs. These plans need to be created in advance of any infestation. Improvising when issues arise will create additional problems, cause delays and leave out essential measures. Important elements to include in your action plans are room preparations, resident relocation, housekeeping, pest control and communications strategy.

Several steps can be taken to help reduce the risks of infestations. All employees—everyone from the owner to the janitorial staff—should be prepared to identify and act on issues to avoid the problems that stem from major infestations.

Specifically, LTC facilities should:

- Implement prevention strategies, including rules about checking any furniture from the outside for bed bugs and ensuring that bedding has been run through a high heat cycle.
- Design proactive education programs to inform staff about the issue and the protocols on an ongoing basis, given staff turnover.
- Develop detection processes including frequent inspections of critical areas and scheduling canine detection teams periodically. Remember, bed bugs can be introduced into a facility at any time. By the time they are easily seen, it's too late. An infestation is has already become full blown.
- When issues arise, act with the urgency and seriousness necessary to show the institution's concern for the welfare of residents and staff and to solve problems before they spread.
- Maintain clear and consistent communication strategies when issues arise, including maintaining a chain of command and discretion to avoid causing panic.
- Determine if and how the facility should educate residents about bed bugs.
- Select safe, effective and thorough pest control treatment methods that do not affect residents' health. Use only experienced and reputable pest control companies whose bed bug treatments are primarily physical in nature. Chemicals should only be used as a secondary measure, if at all.
- Show the foremost concern about protecting residents' health while eliminating an infestation. Pest control treatment decisions should be careful not to disrupt resident routines and care.
- Budget for bed bug detection and treatment costs; understand how they are a distinct issue from other pest control and maintenance expenses.

Bed bugs are a significant problem in healthcare settings in rural, suburban and urban communities. Creating protocols that lessen the ways these critters can be introduced into a facility and ensuring that remediation plans are in place will limit the risks of full-blown infestations that can affect patient health, employees' well-being and a facility's reputation.

Glenn Waldorf is a director with Bell Environmental Services, a full-service pest control company serving the New York Metropolitan Area. Bell provides pest control and bed bug control services for many healthcare facilities, including nursing homes and hospitals.

For more information, call (877) 662-9991 or visit www.bell-environmental.com.