

Taking Control of Pest Management

Case Study of IPM in Public Housing

By late 2009, staff at one northeastern public housing authority (PHA) found that mice, ants, cockroaches, and bedbugs were overwhelming both the residents and the pest control budget. By improving communication with residents, educating the whole community about IPM, and taking control over pesticide selection and use, this PHA has started turning things around. Now, pest numbers seem to be declining, and the PHA expects a 30% decrease in pests control costs at the pilot IPM implementation site.

Site Summary

- Northeastern United States
- 146 family units
- Low-rise buildings
- Contracted pest control



Unrealized Potential

Before IPM, this PHA was an example of reactive pest control, not proactive pest management. An initial assessment revealed some trouble spots.

- Pest control costs had nearly doubled in the previous year, mostly due to bed bug treatments.
- The pest management professional (PMP), who had a contract with the PHA to provide services, had complete control over treating pest issues. The PMP followed a policy of spraying every dwelling according to a calendar-based schedule, regardless of whether pests were present, using unnecessary amounts of chemicals.
- Communication with residents had room for improvement as well. Residents were not notified of pesticide applications and there was no requirement to report pest problems to maintenance or management. Residents were also not informed as to what they could do to help eliminate or prevent pests in their dwellings.

But, there were also bright spots, each key to the PHA's future success with IPM.

- The lease was well-written and specific about residents' responsibilities for housekeeping and reporting maintenance problems.
- Opportunities for better communication with residents were already in place:
 - The active tenant council could weigh-in on pest control issues; and,

- PHA staff members could supplement the informational brochures about pests that they provided to residents with face-to-face education.
- Social services organizations had a steady presence working with residents at the site, so the PHA knew where to turn to for additional support.
- The deputy executive director had some experience controlling bed bugs with IPM at a previous job. Her expertise and enthusiasm in this area helped the PHA hit the ground running when it came to piloting IPM at this site.
- Most importantly, this housing authority had a great team of people. PHA staff members were eager to improve the living and working environments at the PHA through IPM.

It was clear from the outset that the staff could drive real improvements in pest management at this site.

Two Areas Ready For Improvement

The first step in implementing IPM was to take stock of what was going on. In a phone conversation with the Northeastern IPM Center, PHA staff members shared information about pest control costs, infestations, reporting and work order systems, and the chain of command in choosing pest management strategies. Based on what they provided, it was clear that the PHA needed to make changes on two fronts: synergize the “people side” by working more directly with residents to control pests, and improve the “service side” by requesting IPM services from PMPs.

The next step was to get everyone involved. Administrative and maintenance staff, residents, and the PMP all needed to be brought up to speed on the principles of IPM. An initial training session organized through the Northeastern IPM Center introduced representatives of each group to IPM, complete with reference materials and examples of preferred tools, like insect monitors and mousetraps. The day-long session was led by two expert IPM trainers at no cost to the PHA. While the session was based on a prepared syllabus, trainers took information that the PHA had shared and tailored the training day to the site. Trainers visited two specific properties with the trainees pointing out areas of vulnerability and identifying creative, non-chemical approaches to pest management. In addition, participants asked questions about the specific problems they faced. Everyone left knowing how IPM fit into their daily duties. From this starting point, the PHA began to spread the word about IPM throughout the pilot property.

Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is an effective and environmentally sensitive approach to pest management that relies on a combination of common-sense practices. IPM programs use current, comprehensive information on the life cycles of pests and their interaction with the environment. This information, in combination with available pest control methods, is used to manage pest damage by the most economical means, and with the least possible hazard to people, property, and the environment. (EPA)

People Come Together for Change

The most immediate changes happened on the people side.

- Communication not only increased; it became better by stressing in-person dialogue and clearly laying out pest management expectations.
- The lease was revised with stronger language about housekeeping and pest prevention so that residents clearly understood their role from day one. An IPM video is shown to every new resident as part of the lease up process.
- PHA staff members inspect each new resident's home within 45 days after move in, to identify pest-conducive conditions and offer support to potential problem units early on.
- Resident services staff hold periodic workshops with incentives for participation, reinforcing information presented in the lease, printed fliers, and inspections.
- Staff accompanied PMP on pest inspections and some service delivery to further educate themselves and the residents at home during the inspections.

Overall, PHA staff members and the PMP have come to regard tenant interactions as educational opportunities. Education and tenant involvement are now the first line of defense against pest infestations.

The Service Side: Who Has the Right Expertise?

The PHA's pest control contract didn't specify a preference for IPM, so the PHA let it expire a few months into the IPM pilot. However, two obstacles made it difficult to find a replacement. First, the PHA was not able to find a provider in their area willing to commit to a long-term, IPM-based pest management strategy. Second, developing a new request for proposals (RFP) that specifies the use of IPM techniques can be a time-consuming process for PHAs, requiring several rounds of revisions and approval.

As a result, this PHA is missing a key participant in the IPM team: the PMP. This is far from ideal, since IPM stresses continued involvement from all members of the IPM team—residents, staff, *and* the PMP. Pest management services have been provided on a case-by-case basis, which means that temporary PMPs can't develop stable relationships with tenants or sophisticated knowledge of the pest problems at the site. Not having a contractor also puts the responsibility for inspection and monitoring on the maintenance staff so that they can call in a PMP to get rid of the infestation before it grows and spreads.

A Positive Outlook

Even without a pest control contract, IPM implementation is moving forward. PHA staff members have continued to build their expertise in pest management since the initial IPM training. The PHA, not the contractor, now chooses which pesticides are to be used by PMPs, basing their decisions on risk, effectiveness, and cost. Following the principles of IPM, the PHA only allows pesticide treatments when evidence of pests is found through inspection and monitoring. Plus, residents know what to look for as a result of the stepped-up education efforts, so problems get reported for treatment earlier than in the past.

Since this housing authority began implementing IPM, pest control costs have stopped increasing. In fact, staff members expect a decrease in pest control costs of over 30% during the first year. Each of the troublesome pests that the development faced in 2009—bed bugs, cockroaches, mice, and ants—seems less prevalent. Overall, the PHA staff members finally feel like their efforts to provide safe, pest-free housing are working.

Summary

If you want to replicate this PHA's success, start by focusing on these pieces of the IPM puzzle:

- Educate residents, PMPs, and PHA staff members about IPM together to ensure that they are all equally knowledgeable about IPM. To request training or download the resident training video, visit www.stoppests.org/ipm-training.
- Increase both the quality and quantity of communication with residents:
 - Discuss pest management expectations during the lease signing process;
 - Hold IPM training workshops; and,
 - Inspect units within 90 days after move in.
- Take control of pest management:
 - Encourage PHA staff to learn more about IPM and current pest management practices;
 - Discourage calendar-based or preventive pesticide application; and,
 - Discuss pesticide options with PMPs. Base decisions on the level of infestation, risk, effectiveness, and cost.

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For more information and resources visit; www.stoppests.org.

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