

Media Messaging Advice for Housing Professionals Regarding Bed Bugs

First, determine if you are dealing with a confirmed case of bed bugs. To best determine, err on the side of caution and seek expert evaluation from a trusted pest management company. Always seek expert evaluation over self-evaluation. It provides the tenants/clients with the peace of mind that you are taking the issue seriously, in addition to providing the most thorough and effective evaluation.

If a confirmed introduction or infestation is determined, then your first initiative should be to inform and educate the tenants/clients. Uniformed tenants are a journalist's favorite interview. They are quick to paint the scenario as dire, especially if they feel that media attention will help solve the problem fast. The messaging that you develop for the media should also first be used on tenants. It is a good idea to call a tenants' meeting and present the situation. Be honest and admit that an introduction has been confirmed, but immediately follow up with the fact that there has been a national resurgence of bed bug infestations and that all buildings are at risk. Explain that the situation is resolvable through pest management services being put in place by reputable experts. Offer a free tenant education session that will provide hands-on instruction for identifying bed bugs and preventing further introduction. Remind the tenant that their support and willingness to do their part will help eradicate the building's bed bug problem more efficiently and prevent further introductions. Provide the tenants with take-home information on bed bugs and a formal letter that states your messaging and deliverables. This will help reinforce your messaging to the tenants and maintain their trust.

Informed tenants are more likely to repeat your messaging to the media, if they are called upon by journalists to provide an interview. The media does appreciate highlighting cases where honesty is at the forefront, and immediate, measurable efforts are being made to rectify the problem.

When dealing with media, keep in mind that honesty is the best policy. But, also keep in mind that too much information can be damaging. Always respond to media calls in a timely manner. Ignoring a call or not returning a call will always be noted in a story and can have a negative effect on your attempts to handle your bed bug problem. Plan what your messaging ahead of time. The best plan for messaging is to admit the negative and build on the positives. Briefly confirm that there is report of bed bug bugs, but go into detail about the efforts you have put in place to control the situation and ongoing efforts such as routine inspection and monitoring that help you manage bed bugs.

Housing agencies should decide who their spokesperson will be on this issue and direct all inquiries to that person (this improves clarity and consistency of messages). In addition, the "front line" staff (anyone who answers the phone) should be given some basic information about how to respond (and how NOT to respond) to callers with questions.

Sample messaging (be honest and only state what is true about your program):

CONFIRMED CASE: “Unfortunately, our country is seeing a resurgence of bed bugs. No building is immune. We take bed bug reports seriously and have enlisted the help of trusted pest management experts to provide a detailed and thorough evaluation of our properties. We are working with them to provide the safest and most effective removal services in our facilities. We have trained our staff to be able to identify and educate tenants on bed bugs. We are also pleased to be able to provide on-site support and free bed bug educational sessions to our tenants. We are confident that we can work together to eliminate the identified infestations and maintain the homes in our facilities.”

UNCONFIRMED CASE: “We have received report of a possible bed bug introduction in our facility. This report is not confirmed. We take the report very seriously and are working with a pest management expert to provide a thorough evaluation of our properties. Unfortunately, bed bug introductions are resurging throughout the country. No building is immune. We have been aware of this resurgence and have been working with our staff by training them to properly identify bed bugs while also teaching them to provide on-site support to our tenants. We are also pleased to have been able to provide free bed bug education sessions to our tenants so that they can help us provide them with the best possible service in the event of a bed bug introduction. We are confident that by working together, we can prevent bed bugs from being a threat to the homes in our facilities.”

UNFOUNDED CASE: “We have received report of a possible bed bug introduction in our facilities. We have taken the reports very seriously and have worked with a pest management expert to thoroughly evaluate our buildings by interviewing residents, inspecting each unit with a bed bug sniffing dog and visual inspections, and installing monitoring devices. We are pleased to announce that there are no confirmed cases of bed bugs currently in our facilities. However, this does not mean that we can rest easy. Bed Bugs have made a resurgence throughout the country and no building is immune. We are committed to managing the ongoing threat of bed bugs by training our staff to properly identify bed bugs and provide on-site support to our tenants. We will continue to work with pest management experts to maintain our bed-bug-free environment. And we will also offer free bed bug education sessions to our tenants so that we can enlist their help in reporting possible bed bug introductions and taking steps to prevent them. We are confident that by working together, we can manage bed bugs in our buildings.”