

Recruiting Residents for War on Bugs

Case Study of the City of York Housing Authority's IPM Program

Getting residents on board with pest management makes all the difference.

That's the lesson learned by one public housing authority (PHA) in a small city in the northeast. The site's enthusiastic property manager got integrated pest management (IPM) off the ground by leveraging lease language, selling IPM directly to residents, requiring participation through responsibility agreements, and offering hands-on training and support. The focal point of their efforts consisted of a rigorous case management model, where residents and staff were paired up to resolve pest issues. Direct communication between the pest management professional (PMP), executive management, site staff, and residents was key for putting IPM into action at this PHA. From "One-Man Pest Control" to "IPM Team."

Site Summary

The pilot site had the following characteristics:

- Northeastern United States
- 188 family units
- Townhouses
- Contracted pest control

Selling IPM to the Community

Selling the idea of IPM was the first step. The property manager drew on her background in marketing to get the word out about IPM. Using an approach she dubbed the "Involvement of Important People," she made it clear from the outset that *everyone* was expected to participate: office staff, contractors, residents, managers, maintenance staff, and support services personnel. She even produced fun freebies, like stickers and magnets branded with IPM information, to get the word out and to make IPM seem cool.

Individuals from all these groups were required to attend IPM trainings, which were run by the PHA frequently in the community. As a result of getting everyone on board from day one, residents with pest issues began to feel that they were part of a larger team with the common goal of IPM, not singled out as troublemakers who needed to shape up.

This initial team-building work set the stage for battling preconceptions about pests in public housing. Staff and residents alike needed to end their apathy towards pests in public housing. The image of public housing residents as people who don't care about or expect much from their surroundings was shown to be false.

To change staff attitudes and develop relationships between staff and residents, maintenance personnel were paired with residents in focus units. Focus units are units that the PMP or site staff has found to have serious pest issues. Residents learned to trust the staff and to report pest and maintenance issues promptly. At the same time, staff made personal connections with residents and shared in their success when residents made necessary changes to take food, water, and shelter away from pests in their homes. When stubborn housekeeping issues persisted, the property manager stepped in to provide additional education and lease enforcement. Residents and staff got to know each other and appreciate each others' efforts to implement IPM, making the implementation that much more effective and the work day that much more rewarding.

Small Changes in Thinking

Shifts in terminology and subtle changes in attitudes supported the focused interventions. Rather than just telling people what they should do, support staff learned to approach resident interactions as exchanges: the resident needs something (like fewer pests in their unit), and the PHA can provide them with the tools needed to address the issue (like information on controlling pests, a referral to support services, or a visit from the PMP).

Team members also changed some of the language they use in resident interactions to be less threatening:

- Staff set up "appointments" rather than "inspections" with residents in their homes, inviting conversation instead of merely assessment.
- "Problem units" are called "focus units," minimizing blame and emphasizing the improvements that can be made when everyone on the IPM team focuses on one troublesome location.

Even the concept of "training" changed. When residents were required to complete extra training in housekeeping techniques, it was not portrayed as punishment for bad habits. In fact, they received completion certificates and were encouraged to add their training experience to their resumes. IPM and housekeeping training became a positive part of residents' lives. These small shifts in attitude and language contributed to a trusting environment where communication about pests and pest control could flow more freely.

Help From Within the Resident Community Benefits Everyone

Another key individual was the site's peer educator. The peer educator is a resident with extra training in IPM who assists PHA staff with educating the resident community about effective pest management. While simultaneously pursuing a social work degree, this site's peer educator signed on to coach residents one-on-one in their homes. Because she was a resident, and generally well-regarded in the community, gaining trust and respect came more easily for her than it did for the housing authority's staff. Plus, this program gave the peer educator the chance to get on-the-ground experience in case management, which she plans use in her future career. The PHA hopes to find funds to continue her employment.

The peer educator's knowledge about IPM and no-nonsense interpersonal style contributed to her success. For example, she followed up with residents on the PMP's service and reviewed pest control service reports, making sure that treatments were applied correctly and only when necessary. She stood in for housing authority staff when they were unable to communicate with certain residents because of time constraints or cultural differences. She even took the time to do one-on-one cleaning demonstrations with residents with recurrent pest issues. Having an enthusiastic resident collaborator meant that the housing authority had an extra set of eyes, ears, and hands that residents were willing to trust to ensure that IPM techniques were properly implemented throughout the development.

The peer educator's most effective technique was to demonstrate what "clean" looks like to residents in focus units. First, with the resident present, she used masking tape to box off small areas of the wall, stove, counter, and any other surface that needed cleaning. Then she demonstrated proper cleaning techniques using materials found at a local discount store. The resident was then assigned to keep the tape in place and clean the rest of the apartment until it matched the demonstration areas. One week later, the peer educator returned to check on progress, and offer more guidance as necessary.



Before and after IPM case management in a child's bedroom

The Contractor's Role

One area of this housing authority's IPM implementation plan that still has room for improvement is the pest management contract. While the current contractor is on board with adopting IPM strategies, communication has not been ideal. The contractor sends a detailed report of findings and treatments after each visit, but he sends it via email. At this housing authority, email is not the preferred method of communication, so these reports do not always get integrated into the existing work order system. One of the next steps in their IPM program will be to adopt a reporting system that works for both the PMP and the PHA.

Keys to Success

- Spread the word about IPM within the resident community.
- Bring residents, staff, and contractors into conversation through shared IPM training experiences and case management.
- Encourage all PHA staff to have a positive attitude when interacting with residents.
- Recruit enthusiastic residents as peer educators to assist with overseeing IPM implementation.

Want to know more?

Hear the property manager share her story at <http://tinyurl.com/7hwczm6>.

Authors

Danya Glabau and Allison Taisey
The Northeastern IPM Center

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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)

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