

SROs fight hot-weather infestations

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complaint (from a hotel) once every other month or so. But then in October I got seven or eight. One 80-unit hotel was 70% infested."

In March, unseasonable scorching weather brought the most bedbug complaints to her desk than any other month this year.

"It's a nightmarish thing to happen," readily agrees Eliah Bornstein, property management supervisor for Conard House, which owns and operates many hotels and apartment buildings throughout the city, including Department of Public Health master lease SROs. The Tenderloin and South of Market, more so than the Mission, have the highest concentrations of the bugs, pest control experts say.

"It costs a tremendous amount of money to fight bedbugs, which nobody ever thinks to put into a budget," Bornstein continues. "No one plans on bedbugs. Yet it's hundreds of thousands of dollars and a real threat to our operations."

"We have a pretty good handle on it now. But if you had asked me last year, I would have been very pessimistic. We've been on a learning curve. Steaming failed miserably, I've heard, and insecticides kill 80%, but then 20% scatter to neighboring units. So we go into a unit once a week for three weeks to see if it's okay."

"There's no silver bullet for them either because there's no guarantee they won't come back. It's not a war you win. It's a quagmire."

Tenants shoulder some of the responsibility for making the strategy work by not bringing the bugs inside. If a tenant's unit has repeated infestations, Bornstein says, he would have to be evicted, something that hasn't happened yet. "But you don't want to clamp down on people so that they are afraid to report an infestation."

Even totally eradicated by insecticides and intense heat or cold treatments, bedbugs can come right back. Infestations don't necessarily stem from unsanitary conditions, but rather from being transported. They can enter a room on a pants cuff or in a suitcase, and the misery starts all over.

As one expert says, "It's no disgrace to have them; it's a disgrace not to get rid of them."

Hard to detect, they live long and multiply rapidly, migrating through walls, ceilings and floors from one room to another looking for warm bodies.

Two months ago in the Hartland Hotel, Louis Raia had hundreds of them crazy about him. They fed on him at night, then crawled away to hide. He was none the wiser.

"Oh, bedbugs are a hassle," Raia says, after giving a tenant's report at a Central City SRO Collaborative meeting in June. "They really upset your life. Sometimes they are so bad you have to come back and get rid of them a second time."

Raia had bites on his body but they weren't bad and he didn't notice any telltale signs on the bed sheets that the bugs were there. The smell they emit from their "stink systems" was nothing alarming, though at the time he didn't know about it anyway.

"They're supposed to have a sweet smell, and I had that smell in my room," Raia says. "But I just didn't know any better. Now, I know what to do."

Basically, action starts with a tenant recognizing the presence of bedbugs and informing the hotel management, which then begins professional eradication measures. The Health Department gets involved if there is a formal complaint.

Although bedbugs have been found even in the city's five-star hotels, according to pest controllers, the SROs are most vulnerable. Bedbugs, with their flat bodies, can hide in the seams of clothing and in the narrowest cracks of a folding chair or suitcase, even in a night-light or an alarm clock. They don't mind traveling a bit.

"They've been with us throughout civilization," says Johnson Ojo, head of the Health Department's Environmental Health Section. "But it's a relatively new problem for us in San Francisco. Ten years ago we dealt with cockroaches, mice and flies. But in the last two-three years bedbugs have become an issue. Now, we've got a pretty good handle on it."

The key to control, he says, is informing residents so they can recognize bedbugs, report them and start eradicating before the problem turns into a costly infestation. The Health Department gives regular in-service sessions on bedbugs for SRO hotel residents. In May and June, the Tenderloin Housing Clinic, which runs most of the master lease hotels under the Department of Human Services, disseminated informational flyers on bedbugs. THC also had a pest controller speak to a meeting of tenant reps.

DPH's Greenwood says nonprofit SRO managers such as THC and Conard House, are "more astute" now about bedbugs. They help residents to properly prepare a room for treatment, she says.

"Hotels are helping a lot, but not all of them," Greenwood says. "It's the master lease nonprofits that are more supportive in dealing with these issues. The private ones (SROs), well, I don't know what they do. And of course the largest percent of hotels aren't master-leased."

"We are very proactive," Ojo says, referring to education outreach. "And so the situation is not getting any worse. But summer is the optimum time. The eggs that bedbugs lay hatch more rapidly then. We're better off than a year ago regarding complaints, but I can't give out figures."

Bornstein says Conard House fought a losing battle with the bugs from apartment buildings to hotels for two years before turning the corner eight months ago.

"I don't mean they are gone," Bornstein says with grudging respect for the enemy. "But we've got our system down pretty well. Acting quickly, they can be gone in six weeks. And it has cut our costs by two-thirds. It's not winning, though; it's a standstill. We're just not going to lose now."

Bedbugs go by nicknames like "red coats" and "crimson rambles." They like dining on humans but won't ignore small animals, even birds. They grow to 1/3 of an inch long and are fast runners. Their rust brown color turns deep red brown after a blood meal – an evening's engorgement that lasts up to five minutes – after which they find a dark place to snooze for a couple of days. Then they scurry back to their host trough, adored for its warmth and carbon dioxide.

Their bite injects a fluid that sometimes raises an itchy welt. But it wasn't the case with Louis Raia on the Hartland's fifth floor.

"I didn't know I was being bitten," he says. "So it was a surprise that I had them. And then they turned up in three other rooms on two different floors."

Unlike flies that live just a few days, bedbugs live six to 12 months. A female lays 200 to 500 tiny cream-colored eggs in a lifetime. They hatch in six to 17 days and go through several growth phases, shedding skins along the way.

Infestations were common nationwide before World War II. No doubt San Francisco had its problems in the 1930s when thousands of unemployed men occupied South of Market flophouses. But DDT and improved hygiene in the 1950s made the bugs all but vanish in America.

"But in recent years the bugs have made a comeback," according to a report by Michael Potter of the University of Kentucky, College of Agriculture. "International travel has undoubtedly contributed to the resurgence of bedbugs in this country." And bedbugs, like cockroaches, can also build immunities to pesticides, experts say.

Because bedbugs are cryptic in their habits, they are tough to kill with a first spray treatment. They hide in floor boards, paintings, carpets, behind skirting, wallpaper and electrical outlets and in the cracks of furniture, bed boards and appliances. But they like shelter in dark places best, close to humans. So the

first place hotels residents are advised to look is in bedding, the seams and folds. What looks like pepper on the sheets, is likely their fecal matter. On the floor, they appear as dark seeds, or a blot or puddle.

Sticky traps, like fly paper, can be placed on the floor near bed posts as a monitoring system. At night bedbugs come out of the walls and crevices and travel up the posts to find their human.

Although in some severe cases entire buildings have to be fumigated – requiring tenting – spraying is the most common treatment for a room after it's articles have been removed.

"Tenderloin hotels are difficult," says Nick Fowler, vice president of Allied Pest Management, which does work in the city, Vallejo and Sacramento where, he says, the bugs have recently spread. "A person has everything he owns stacked to the ceiling. You can imagine what it takes to get rid of an infestation. Preparation is the key."

Bed frames have to be disassembled, carpets pulled up, all clothing removed and washed in very hot water. Everything from furniture to radios is put into plastic bags and taken away. (To avoid crevices, one hotel management operation is buying seamless plastic and metal furniture.) Pest controllers spray the room with various specialized insecticides aimed at eggs, nymphs and adults, plus Gentrol IRG, a dust that filters down behind electrical outlets and moldings and into cracks and crevices.

During the spraying process, the resident has to be gone four hours but, with a little training, may help out, as Louis Raia did.

"You're in plastic from the neck down," Raia says. "And every opening you tape up, including zippers."

In most cases a return treatment in seven to 11 days is necessary. Infestations mean treating the surrounding rooms. That's above and below, too.

Fowler says homeless people are not apt to have bedbugs. "Maybe lice, unless they've been in a shelter that's had them," he says. "But for a bedbug to be crawling around the city, no. They like a warmer environment."

Temperatures in the 90s, like our October heat waves, suit them. But at 61 degrees they are chilled into a hibernation that can last up to seven months.

There is a professional difference over what kills bedbugs best. Putting those black plastic bags in the sun for the day, which Allied does, pushes the temperature inside to 120 degrees. The bugs die at 111-113. "I have seen bugs come back from being frozen," Fowler says.

Bornstein hires S.F. Maintenance to send bugs into a deep freeze, the third phase, he says, of Conard House's combative operation that includes pest control and quick-responding property management. S.F. Maintenance works with Tenderloin Neighborhood Development Corp., the John Stewart Co. and Citizens Housing Corp. as well.

The room's contents are bagged – from clothes to furniture – and put into a capacious 24-foot reefer truck. Its temperature is set at 20-below. After 24 hours, bedbugs are dead. (At zero they die in two days and at freezing, two weeks.)

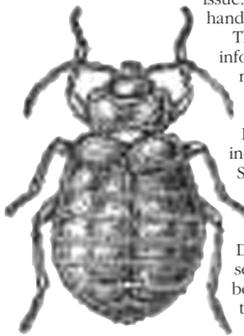
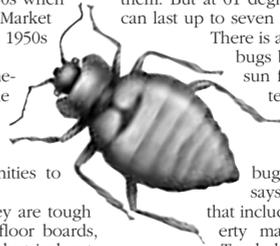
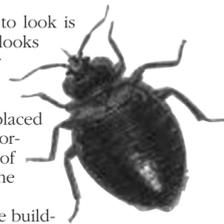
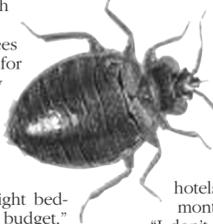
Managements help tenants find other clothes in the interim. The SRO Collaborative, which recommends tenants use three sticky traps per room, says it is trying to set up a laundry allowance for tenants who wash their belongings.

"We've altered our business practices, too," Bornstein says. "We've got very disposable furniture now and we've discontinued buying those refurbished mattresses. It's another thing to exclude. I could be wrong about them, though. But we haven't found any way to use heat."

Not all SROs have the bug problem, he says, but left unchecked bedbugs spread fast and can become a health issue. Some allergic people have bites that itch terribly, get scratched and turn into sores and infections. And bedbugs can transmit diseases. Bornstein estimates that no more than one out of 60 Conard House units have been affected, due to vigilance on everyone's part.

"Last year I admit the fear was spreading among the staff here," Bornstein says. "Some were afraid of bringing it home. You know an egg could just be riding on a shoe – they don't have to mate! And I had a baby at home. But the chances are remote, I think. It's probably more dangerous driving to work."

At the Episcopal Sanctuary shelter at Fifth and Bryant three dozen men were waiting for beds for the night on a recent afternoon. A half dozen were asked if they had encountered any bedbugs at the shelter and they all said no. ■



This freezer truck, which will be loaded with bags of infested items, kills bedbugs at 20 below zero for 24 hours.

PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOJO

Corner's an oasis if life's a desert



PHOTOS BY VIRGINIA ALLYN

There are corners like this in every big city. This corner in the Tenderloin is a big, bold, neon scripture of the problems of America. Fragments of broken glass, bottle caps, empty cigarette packs blow in the wind on these one-way streets. Walk on by anytime. Here's what you may see and hear.



Clarence and Andrew

— VIRGINIA ALLYN

Read-letter day for SROs

New post office policy on heels of Pelosi probe, city pressure

BY TOM CARTER

In a breakthrough for SROs, the U.S. Postal Service has identified five hotels where letter carriers will treat the people who live there like residents instead of tourists, and a post office official hints that all master lease hotels may be included under the new policy.

The post office will change its single-drop mail delivery to centralized – individual lobby boxes – for five SRO hotels, a switch the hotels sought by petitions that later were backed unanimously by a Board of Supervisors resolution on June 15.

The resolution followed Rep. Nancy Pelosi's announcement of a congressional inquiry into why SRO hotels weren't getting centralized service. In some cases, as reported by The Extra, regulation new boxes for residents had been fallow in lobbies for months, even years. The post office wouldn't approve them for deliveries because it considered SROs

"transient" hotels.

Pelosi said she was "pleased" the post office had complied with the SRO residents' request and pledged to continue working on "secure access to their mail" as well as for all San Franciscans.

Apparently, a meeting some time after the Pelosi announcement between Robert Reed, the Postal Service's manager of Customer Service Operations, and Executive Director Trent Rhorer of the Department of Human Services convinced Reed of the permanency of SRO residency and the city's aim to establish these hotels as homes for the homeless.

The hotels slated for the switch are the Cadillac (380 Eddy), Seneca (34 Sixth), Hartland (909 Geary), Camelot (124 Turk) and Bayanihan House (88 Sixth).

"We intend to push for centralized delivery for all SROs, private and nonprofit," said Earl Brown of the Central City SRO Collaborative who helped the hotels organize their campaign.

Reed said the Postal Service would contact other SROs for possible deliv-

ery changes. "We have met with representatives for the City of San Francisco and have obtained a listing of SROs that are being sponsored," he wrote in a letter to Brown.

The post office additionally promised to change another policy and start forwarding tenants' mail.

"We do not foresee this to be a problem area, as long as the customer has properly completed a change of address form," Reed wrote.

Bayanihan tenant Charles Maxwell was the first of the hotel representatives to bring the plight of his building to Brown last January. The 152-unit Bayanihan, a reincarnation of the old, burned-out Delta Hotel, opened in October 2003 but had not conferred with the post office about its bank of installed mailboxes.

"We learned a lesson in this as well," said Bayanihan Building Administrator Marsha Jackson. "We should have been involved with the post office from the beginning with the new construction. Things would have gone smoother." ■