



CCPA
CANADIAN CENTRE
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES
MANITOBA OFFICE

RESEARCH • ANALYSIS • SOLUTIONS

FAST FACTS

September 9, 2010

Winnipeg needs a bed bug plan

The thought of being bitten in the night by tiny, blood-sucking bed bugs is enough to make anyone cringe. But bed bugs are making an international comeback—to the point where a global “bed bug pandemic” is predicted.

The increase in international travel, modern heating and air conditioning that provide more stable environments for the bugs to flourish, the banning of chemicals such as DDT and greater resistance to chemicals being used have meant that hotel rooms, apartments, houses, dormitories, libraries, and movie theatres are all now sites of bed bug infestations. Winnipeg has not been exempted.

Contrary to the widespread belief that cleanliness and personal hygiene are the cause of infestations, bed bugs do not discriminate. They are attracted to humans by a combination of body temperature and carbon dioxide. While anyone can experience a bed bug infestation, the social impacts can be felt most acutely by low-income people who rely on second-hand furniture and clothing, and lack quality housing and control over its maintenance.

Costs associated with treatment (laundering, vacuuming, replacing mattresses and furniture) of infestations can be overwhelming for those with limited financial resources. “It’s just like a fire,

where you have to start all over,” one inner-city resident explained. Added to these costs are social stigma, shame, and embarrassment.

Unfortunately, very little has been done on the policy side in Winnipeg to combat bed bugs—and the problem is likely to get worse before it gets better. The City of Toronto, which has experienced a dramatic increase in bed bug infestations since 2003, has taken a comprehensive approach—the Toronto Bed Bug Project.

In a February 2008 report, Toronto’s medical officer of health, Dr. David McKeown, recommended that a committee develop a plan to reduce infestations, with emphasis on vulnerable populations. It was mandated to develop bed bug control strategies, an infestation tracking system, and a public education system and to identify resource and funding requirements. The project has a steering committee and seven workgroups made up of staff from public health, housing, solid waste, and agencies such as social services, pest management, and landlord and tenant representatives.

While Winnipeg still considers bed bugs to be a nuisance or pest, Toronto sees them as a public health threat. Similar to Winnipeg, legislation in Ontario doesn’t specifically refer to bed bug infestations. As such, the Toronto project has



CCPA
CANADIAN CENTRE
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES
MANITOBA OFFICE

309 - 323 Portage Avenue
Winnipeg, MB R3B 2C1
T 204.927.3200 F 204.927.3201
ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca
www.policyalternatives.ca

The *Fast Facts* are produced and distributed free via email. They can be reproduced as an OpEd or opinion piece without obtaining further permission, provided they are not edited, and full credit is given to both the author and the source, CCPA-MB. Please contact CCPA-MB today to begin your free subscription.

FAST FACTS continued ...

undertaken a review of local and international approaches to develop legislation to support an integrated pest management approach.

Particularly important, the Bed Bug Project has advocated for emergency relief funding to assist vulnerable citizens in purchasing services to prepare their residences for treatment. An enterprise called “Bug and Scrub” has been created that provides employment to homeless Torontonians.

Bed bugs are now a reality in Winnipeg. Rather than leaving individuals to fend for themselves, Winnipeg requires a coordinated effort that begins by setting up a committee modeled after the Toronto Bed Bug Project.

In the past, Winnipeg’s maintenance and occupancy bylaw was the main tool to deal with bed bug infestations. It identified the owner as being responsible for dealing with an infestation. In November 2008, this by-law was replaced by the neighbourhood livability bylaw, which considers bed bugs to be a “nuisance” and “unsanitary” and places the onus on both owners and occupants to prevent their existence in a dwelling.

To combat bed bugs more effectively, however, bylaw changes are in order. First, bed bugs present their own unique set of circumstances and should constitute a separate section within the bylaw, rather than being grouped with other pests. Second, the rights and responsibilities of landlords and tenants need to be more clearly spelled out, while bed bugs need to be recognized as a public health threat and placed under the mandate of public health inspectors. Landlords who fail to adequately address bed bug issues and tenants who fail to cooperate or interfere with pest management should be charged.

One small, yet significant, contribution would be to provide resources such as mattress covers and vacuums to residents in need. Use of mattress covers and regular vacuuming are important in preventing an infestation.

Inner-city agencies are often the first places citizens turn to when dealing with an infestation. This is why ensuring bed bug related funding to inner-city agencies is so important.

Also important is the disposal of infested furniture and mattresses. Wrapping mattresses and furniture in plastic prior to removal and marking these items are important steps residents should follow when getting rid of infested furniture. The city should coordinate quicker pickup of used mattresses and other large furniture.

A Winnipeg bed bug plan could usefully include the hiring of low-income people for aspects of its implementation.

With the global bed bug pandemic likely to get worse before it gets better, it is now more important than ever for Winnipeg to formulate a comprehensive and coordinated bed bug plan. As the problem worsens, the costs to our city will only increase.

Elizabeth Comack is Head of the Department of Sociology at the University of Manitoba and a CCPA-MB Research Associate; James Lyons is a graduate student in the Department of Sociology, University of Manitoba

This article is based upon a study conducted as part of the Manitoba Research Alliance project, “Transforming Aboriginal and Inner-City Communities” (<http://www.manitobaresearchalliance-tiac.ca>)



CCPA

CANADIAN CENTRE
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES
MANITOBA OFFICE

309 - 323 Portage Avenue
Winnipeg, MB R3B 2C1
T 204.927.3200 F 204.927.3201
ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca
www.policyalternatives.ca

The *Fast Facts* are produced and distributed free via email. They can be reproduced as an OpEd or opinion piece without obtaining further permission, provided they are not edited, and full credit is given to both the author and the source, CCPA-MB. Please contact CCPA-MB today to begin your free subscription.