



Using Principles of Universal Design to Make Shelters Accessible to Victims (and Inaccessible to Bed Bugs!)

Best Practices: *To make the shelter environment welcoming to residents and hostile to bed bugs. To prevent the re-traumatization of victims by providing a warm, welcoming, clean environment. To foster an environment of open, safe communication.*

Staff Knowledge

- All residential staff should know what bed bugs in all life stages and bed bug bites look like - picture cards are helpful. They should be familiar with the differences between bed bug bites and bites of other insects such as mosquitoes, spiders, bees, etc.
- **Treatments to have on hand** include: anti-itch ointment, witch hazel, Benadryl, calamine lotion, etc. to alleviate the itch that bed bug bites cause. Itching the bites may cause infection, so having these treatments on-site can prevent further medical complications or issues.
- Staff should be aware of where to find extra mattress and pillow case covers and be encouraged to check all residents' beds before and after their stay and continually encourage residents to alert staff if their cover has been damaged in some way.
 - When victims are coming from an abusive home and entering into an unfamiliar environment, they may be afraid to tell shelter staff if the mattress or pillow covers are ripped. Explain in advance that **it is okay if they rip** and that they can be **easily replaced**. Check in with residents regularly, and check covers when rooms are empty, to ensure that the covers are intact. **Replace damaged covers immediately**.
- **Language** used by staff should be trauma-informed. This means staff should present information in an empowering, non-judgmental, compassionate, respectful manner.

How to Have the Conversation

- If your shelter has or has had a recent bed bug problem, victims should be informed in a sensitive way **prior** to coming into shelter.

- *Suggested language:* “We have recently had a sighting of bed bugs in our shelter. We are doing everything we can to prevent further bugs and to kill those that are here now. Before you come, we just want you to be aware. If you have any questions, please just ask.”
- When discussing bed bugs, **myths** associated with bed bugs should be dispelled. It should be explained that anyone can acquire bed bugs and that many types of homes and businesses have had them. Staff can have recent news articles or examples of major businesses that have had outbreaks. Bed bug prevention should be explained as a *universal precaution* that everyone must go through, not just that person.
- To prevent bed bugs, many shelters ask new residents to **wash their clothing and belongings** upon entrance into shelter. This process can be humiliating and re-traumatizing for victims. When washing policies are implemented and communicated without much thoughtfulness, victims will draw conclusions that staff thinks that they are dirty and live a dirty lifestyle. Special care and consideration should be paid by staff as they explain and implement such procedures.
 - Before beginning the conversation, staff should be aware that one effect of trauma and survival tool that victims use is **hypervigilance**, which means that victims can be highly sensitive to the demeanor and tone of advocates. Advocates should be mindful of this, and other effects of trauma, as they communicate with victims.
 - Each new resident should be informed, prior to entering into shelter, that each new resident is expected to wash their belongings soon after arrival. It should be discussed that this is a way to give everyone a **fresh start** and to remove **scents and allergens** to make the shelter more comfortable for everyone (pets, smoke, etc.), as well as for bed bug extermination. Shelters often have a stigma, and the knowledge that *all* new residents go through the same process can alleviate some concern that the victim has about the other shelter residents.
- Prior to entering shelter, residents should be informed that **free laundry services**, including a washer, dryer, and detergent, are available. Since some residents may be accustomed to using Laundromats or will wait to do laundry immediately before coming into shelter, advanced knowledge of this amenity is important.

Washing Items

- Upon arrival, victims should be reminded about the shelter’s policy on washing items. This conversation should be had in private with ample time for explanation and repetition if needed.
- In addition to washing and drying all machine-washable items on the **highest heat setting available**, toys and other items also need to be cleaned. Cloth toys (stuffed animals, etc.) should be washed similarly to clothes. Plastic toys should be washed in a

bleach/water solution to disinfect. Staff should put all communal toys in the shelter through this same treatment on a weekly basis to disinfect for all.

- Care and attention should be given to the victim during the process of washing items. Staff should carefully **demonstrate** how to use the washer, dryer, and detergent. Since no two washing machines and dryers are alike, and since staff should not make assumptions about anyone's life skills, the laundry settings and proper amounts of detergent should be explained and shown. Victims may have cognitive difficulties or memory loss due to physical or emotional trauma, so staff should expect to patiently **repeat instructions** and demonstrations.
- **Visual instructions** including pictures and large-print words on the proper use of laundry facilities can also be posted. This serves as a reminder *and* is friendly for children as well as victims with Limited English Proficiency, illiterate or low-literate, who have cognitive disabilities, or who are visual learners.
- Care and attention should be given to **children** during the process of washing items. Older children can be empowered and engaged to do the laundry and wash their toys. For younger children, it can be explained that it is time for their stuffed animals and toys to "get a bath". Staff should offer other toys and items that have already been through the process for children to play with while they wait.
- When purchasing **detergents** for shelter, staff should consider the effects of smells and chemicals. Unintentional sensations, including smells, can trigger a victim, cause a flashback, and throw them back into crisis. Therefore, *unscented, free and clear detergents* should be purchased and used for all shelter laundry, especially linens for incoming residents. Additionally, free and clear detergents are safe for children and people who have sensitive skin.
- If a victim is seriously injured or in an acute state of distress or exhaustion, shelter staff should be **flexible** with their policies. Residents may need some time to rest or eat first. Staff should offer to **assist them** with laundering items.
- **Staff should not search bags or rooms.** Searching bags and carefully examining items is unnecessarily intrusive and can re-traumatize victims. Violating someone's privacy in this manner can perpetuate the dynamics of abuse from which s/he has fled.
- In lieu of washing items, large **hot boxes** are available which fit luggage-sized items. Once any plastic or other items that could melt are removed by the client (staff should not do this unless asked), the items are heated to a degree (at least 120) which would rid the items of any living bed bugs, eggs, or larvae.
- Staff should take the time that the washing or hot box use is occurring to either show the residents around the shelter and to their room to **settle in**, invite the resident to have a snack or meal, and/or to begin basic intake. This way the resident can keep an

eye on their things (especially important for victims who are chronically homeless). Residents should not be expected to bathe, change their clothes, or be prohibited from witnessing the process. This can re-traumatize and increase the tension between residents and staff. Instead, residents should be empowered to utilize the bathing facilities as they wish to do so and encouraged to wash their items as soon as they are able.

Consider Your Shelter's Furniture

- **Bed bugs like fabric!** When purchasing or acquiring new couches and chairs, consider **vinyl furniture** instead of fabric. This deters bed bugs *and* is easier to clean!
- When accepting **donations**, examine furniture for signs of bed bugs and other pests carefully.
- **Bed bugs like wood!** Phase out wooden bed frames and replace them with **metal bed frames**.
 - Metal bed frames can have an *institutional feel*, which can re-traumatize residents who have been incarcerated or committed. Keep a selection of **bedding options** and **short bed skirts** on-hand that residents can choose from to make them feel at home. *Caution:* Bed bugs can climb bed skirts! Be sure to keep them short.
- **Bed bugs like to climb!** If you have not yet replaced wooden beds with metal bed frames, a small amount of Vaseline or furniture sliders can help prevent bed bugs from traveling from floors up to mattresses.
- Keep a supply of **mattress and pillow covers** that are impenetrable by bed bugs. Be sure to get the higher quality, **fabric-feeling** covers, which last longer and are more comfortable than plastic covers. These covers keep out bed bugs, protect against spills or bed-wetting, *and* help people who suffer with allergies!