Reducing Health Risks in Public Housing

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Suppression of asthma triggers such as rodents and cockroaches and the pesticides used to treat them is the focus of a new integrated pest management (IPM) training program to be offered in public housing authorities across the country.

The Northeastern IPM Center project, funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development through the U.S. Department of Agriculture, will implement IPM as a low-risk, effective way to reduce pests and pesticide use. IPM is a common sense approach to managing pests that uses knowledge of pests' habits and needs to help residents implement pest prevention tactics for long-term control. Sealing off cracks and crevices where pest can enter and removing food and water are all examples of preventative tactics. In IPM, pesticides are used only as a last resort and they are selected based on their safety to humans and the environment.

Project coordinator Allison Taisey says that one public housing study showed that at least six pesticides were found in the majority of homes studied—including banned and restricted use products. "Unfortunately, not everyone practices IPM, and many institutions don't have a written pest management policy. That leaves unaware residents thinking they have to deal with their own pest problems."

Many people are also unaware that pests and pesticide use can increase the risk of asthma and even cause it in some cases. "A 2006 study points out that asthma affects over 12 percent of children nationwide, but that number increases to 17 percent of the children in New York City, and 30 percent of the children in Harlem," says Taisey. "There is a correlation between public housing and asthma. In addition to the health consequences, asthma episodes in children result in missed school, medical expenses, and lost time at work for the caregiver. There is a way to take these burdens off already struggling families."

Project partners consulted with the USDA-formed advisory committee to review and refine existing IPM training materials pertinent to public housing. "Educational packets are being developed and will be used during one-day trainings for maintenance staff, managers, and resident leaders in each of the four USDA regions," Taisey explains. "The trainings will emphasize a team-based approach, meaning that project partners, trainers, residents, maintenance staff, supervisors, and pest control companies will share in supporting a successful IPM program."

In addition, Taisey says that IPM information will be conveyed to these audiences in a variety of ways, not only as concepts on paper but as demonstrations in real-world situations. "The on-site, hands-on training will also be practical. For example, we will show where to use sticky traps and steel wool, how to seal cracks and crevices and when to contact a pest control professional." Other topics include how to write a pest management policy, performance-based contracts and standard contract specifications for IPM services, and the basic biology and behavior of pests such as cockroaches, rodents, and bed bugs.

Additional project activities include "train-the-trainers" sessions so that a network of professionals across the country who are supporting IPM efforts in public housing can be established. In addition, portions of the trainings will be taped to develop DVDs that will be used by housing authorities to educate their residents. "Our ultimate goal is to demonstrate that through a team approach to IPM, public housing staff and residents can work together to reduce pest problems and contribute positively to healthy homes," says Taisey.

Other partners in the project include the four Regional IPM Centers, the Environmental Protection Agency, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the state-based cooperative extension system, private consultants, pest control operators, and nonprofit organizations, such as the National Center for Healthy Housing.

The Northeastern Integrated Pest Management Center fosters the development and adoption of IPM, a science-based approach to managing pests in ways that generate economic, environmental, and human health benefits. The Center works in partnership with stakeholders from agricultural, urban, and rural settings to identify and address regional priorities for research, education, and outreach. For more information, visit http://NortheastIPM.org.