

# Pest Free Housing Initiative Making a Difference in Boston

*Written by Kristie Auman-Bauer, PA IPM Program, with support from the Northeastern IPM Center, 2008*

Over 23,000 people reside in Boston public housing where pest infestations are a major concern. Not only do pests frustrate residents, they affect their quality of life. A project funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Environmental Protection Agency is helping the Boston Housing Authority address challenges facing pest control by launching, with other partners, the Healthy Pest Free Housing Initiative Project (HPFHI).

In addition to having negative impacts on residents' quality of life, pests like cockroaches, mice and bedbugs can affect their health, since pests and the pesticides used to control them can trigger asthma and cause other problems. HPFHI is working towards reducing these environmental health risks for residents of public housing in Boston, says John Kane, IPM coordinator and planner for the Boston Housing Authority (BHA). "The project's goal is to provide intensive in-home and community-based education designed to change individual and community practices regarding pest control and the use of pesticides."

"Educational programs about pest management are desperately needed because residents will often turn to restricted and illegal pesticides, which can be very dangerous and do not eliminate the pests," Kane explains. According to the project's final report, at the beginning of the project every home tested showed evidence of at least one pesticide that has either been banned or restricted to non-residential use. Nearly 50 percent had cockroach allergen levels that were high enough to trigger attacks in sensitive people.

Both BHA residents and management have identified safe and effective pest management practices as critical to health, safety and quality of life. The project is implementing integrated pest management (IPM) to provide a safer, more effective alternative to traditional pest control services. IPM is a commonsense approach to managing pests that uses knowledge of pests' habits and needs to help residents implement pest prevention tactics for long-term control. Only pesticide products that are least-toxic and that pose the least risk of exposure to residents are used.

Kane says teams of IPM health advocates are providing outreach and in-home education in eight BHA developments involved in the project. "Our team trains the residents in IPM, and we also utilize a train-the-trainer approach in which people are trained to provide education about IPM to newly arriving residents during their orientation." The Boston Public Health Commission has also developed informational brochures and posters in multiple languages that can be used in public housing situations and beyond.

To enhance their educational efforts, a "pesticide buyback" occurs twice a year and gives residents an opportunity to trade unused pesticides for safer products and provides another opportunity for health advocates to connect with residents. "Buybacks are scheduled to coincide with Boston's biannual residential hazardous waste collection. So far, this project has collected a wide array of pesticides including over the counter sprays and bombs, as well as restricted use pesticides that by law can only be applied by a licensed professional," Kane explains.

In addition, the project is changing the requirements for pest control companies contracted in public housing developments. "Instead of routinely spraying pesticides in an entire complex, the pest control company does inspections and only applies gels in units that need it," Kane explains. "Treatments are also tailored toward the individual development. The way pests spread in a three-story building will be very different from a building with 20 stories." Prevention is also emphasized, and tactics such as sealing up cracks and crevices, cutting off water supply, and removing habitat are all steps that are taken once a unit is vacated and during yearly unit inspections.

The project has been very successful. Kane says that there has been up to a 75 percent reduction in work orders dealing with pests and a huge increase in the quality of life for the residents. Over 1,000 BHA households in eight developments have received in-home and community-based support and education to encourage safe and effective pest control practices. The BHA hopes to make the project sustainable and expand their efforts into additional developments. "People are beginning to see they no longer have to live with their pest problems. They feel empowered by

being able to take control of their pest problems and their health,” says Kane.

The Healthy Pest Free Housing Initiative is also working towards translating project findings into proposed policies. “At the state level, the Massachusetts Public Health Association will educate its members about IPM, support IPM advocacy and provide training for community health workers. In addition, the Asthma Regional Council is developing a handbook and kit on IPM for building managers and promoting it to the 375 housing authorities in New England. A similar tool will be aimed at health plans interested in home environmental assessments, education and supplies,” Kane states.

Other partners in the project include the Boston Public Health Commission (the lead agency for the grant), Committee for Boston Public Housing, West Broadway Task Force, Boston University School of Public Health, and local, state, and regional policy and advocacy organizations.

For more information on the project, contact Kane at (617) 988-4107 or e-mail [john.kane@bostonhousing.org](mailto:john.kane@bostonhousing.org).

The Northeastern IPM Center is planning a new IPM education and training program for public housing authorities across the country, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of Agriculture, and other organizations. The 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>.