

September Trustee Tip: Got Bedbugs?

It's enough to give every librarian and library trustee the willies – bedbugs spotted in the library! Bedbugs are an expensive nuisance to treat, but can become an even more expensive nuisance unless library staff and trustees treat the problem seriously.

What Legal Considerations Do Bedbugs Raise?

Worker's Compensation Claims: As a result of bites, employees can develop severe allergic reactions which could result in skin infections. Further, anxiety-related illnesses could arise that may qualify them for worker's compensation benefits.

Discrimination or Harassment Claims: The subject of who introduced the infestation should be handled carefully. If you publically single out an employee or patron, or permit others to do so, you could be liable for harassment and invasion of privacy claims. If an employee feels he or she is accused because of their status in a protected class, the situation could result in a discrimination claim.

Negligence Liability: It is your responsibility to provide a reasonably safe workplace. If you are aware of a bedbug infestation but you do nothing to remedy the problem, the employee may file a claim for damages resulting from the infestation.

Non-employee Claims: Patrons, families of employees - and even vendors - who are exposed to bedbugs in the library could develop an infestation of their own, and could possibly bring claims against the library for negligence.

Violations of OSHA, State and Local Regulations: The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulations may see an untreated bedbug infestation as violating requirements that workplaces are free from hazards likely to cause serious physical harm. Additionally, there are federal, state and local regulations that require workplaces and commercial buildings to be free from insect infestation.

But What if We Know Who Brought In the Bedbugs?

Even if you suspect specific patrons or employees of introducing bedbugs into the library, take care about how they are approached. Bedbugs are not unlike the flu; you're more likely to catch the flu than bedbugs at the library, but you cannot tell a patron with flu symptoms to leave the building, or accuse an employee of starting a flu outbreak!

How Do Libraries Get Rid of Bedbugs?

Finding one bedbug, or even two, does not mean the library is infested; however, a reputable pest control professional should be engaged to assess the situation and recommend treatment solutions. Heavy infestations of bedbugs and other insect pests are often treated with pesticides that require the building(s) to be closed to the public and/or employees for several days. If pest control professionals recommend that the building(s) be closed to employees during treatment, employees should not be present in the building(s) until the pest control professionals deem the building safe for occupation.

What Should We Tell Our Patrons?

It's tempting to play coy with the public about a bedbug problem in the library, but it's better to be upfront. Notify patrons and employees about the problem and steps the library has taken to control it.

How Can We Prevent Reinfestation?

Employees should be on the lookout for signs of bedbugs in returned materials and on library furnishings. Books and DVD cases are often the culprits in returned materials. Libraries can reduce the likelihood of reinfestation by treating returned books that show signs of bedbugs with Packtite or another heat-treatment system. Switching to clear DVD cases can make spotting pests easier. As for library furnishings, regular inspections of furnishings for signs of bedbugs is a must, but libraries can make their furnishings less hospitable to pests by replacing soft upholstered furniture with rigid materials, whenever possible, and by replacing soft upholstered lounge chairs and sofas with vinyl upholstered items that are more difficult for pests to infest.

This Trustee Tip Is Not Intended As Legal Advice. If you feel you need legal advice, consult an attorney.