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Bed, bugs and beyond disgusting

The dastardly pests are making a comeback in the Chicago area

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When Lisa Tousant woke up one morning in August with itchy, red splotches on her elbow, she thought she had been bitten by a mosquito. A few days later, she found more strange, swollen spots up and down her arms and legs.

"You get to scratching and scratching. I almost dug a hole in my arm, that's how bad they were," said Tousant, a 41-year-old city worker who lives in Rogers Park. After scouring her tidy one-bedroom apartment with ammonia in an attempt to wipe out the mysterious scourge, she inspected her mattress. "I pulled the sheets back and turned on the light, and there's the bugs."

Bedbugs -- those nocturnal bloodsuckers -- are on the march in Chicago. After being nearly eradicated in the United States by DDT in the 1950s, the creatures have launched a comeback. Reports of the bugs spiked locally last summer and have been rising ever since. Prompted by an outcry from angry, itchy citizens, city officials next month will train 45 building inspectors to spot the critters. A coalition that includes the Metropolitan Tenants Organization, the Safer Pest Control Project and Ald. Joe Moore's (49th) office is lobbying for a coordinated response that would educate school nurses, establish citywide tracking and launch an aggressive public-awareness campaign.

"It's not at epidemic proportions, but it could be. It certainly is moving in that direction, and that's why the city has to move proactively," said Moore, whose ward has been called a hotbed for the infestation. "We don't want to let this get out of hand."

Orkin Pest Control's Chicago office reports that bedbug complaints doubled from 2007 to 2008. Likewise, Smithereen Pest Management officials said they made 1,650 bedbug calls in Chicago in 2008, up from 900 in 2007. The Metropolitan Tenants Organization, a non-profit renters rights group, is receiving almost a half-dozen calls a day. The problem, experts say, has been exacerbated by the economy. Landlords are slow to send exterminators. And cash-strapped neighbors seem more likely to pluck infected furniture from Dumpsters. What's more, some suspect the bugs are spreading through used-furniture outlets and online networks such as Craigslist.

"Five years ago, it wasn't an issue," said Arturo DelAngel, who works the complaint hot line at the Metropolitan Tenants Organization. "Now it's bedbugs all the time, every day."

The common bedbug, *Cimex lectularius*, is a brownish, flattened insect that typically feeds on humans but will also bite animals, including dogs and cats. Hardy survivors, they can live for more than a year without a meal and thrive anywhere they can find a warm-blooded host. Prolific breeders, female bedbugs lay as many as five eggs per day and hundreds during a lifetime. Unlike roaches or mice, colonies are equally comfortable in immaculate homes as they are in squalid flophouses. "The bedbugs, all they need is you. *You're* the food," said Rachel Rosenberg, director of the Safer Pest Control Project, a group that works to reduce pesticide use. Entomologists say the resurgence in bedbugs is the result of tougher restrictions against the use of toxic pesticides such as DDT, which was banned in 1972, increased travel to Third World countries and the bugs' growing resistance to modern insecticides. Michael Potter, an urban entomologist at the University of Kentucky, believes that bedbugs are poised to become the country's most pressing pest problem. "We're going to see serious increases of this pest, and it's going to affect a lot of people," he said.

For a glimpse into the future, look no further than New York, where bedbug reports have quadrupled, with 8,830 complaints received in 2008, up from 1,839 in 2005. Cincinnati recently established an inter-governmental task force. In Boston, officials slap fluorescent orange stickers that read, "CAUTION! THIS MAY CONTAIN BEDBUGS!" on discarded furniture.

In Chicago, those who have experienced an infestation describe it as traumatizing. "In June, we started noticing little bumps on us. We couldn't figure out why we were scratching," said Tonya Moore, 35, of Rogers Park. Two of her children scratched so persistently they ended up in the emergency room with secondary infections. Other apartments in their 77-unit building became infested too. "A lot of people lost everything. They're too embarrassed to have people over because they have no furniture. They had to throw it all away."

"You wake up in the morning, and they're in your face. They're in the sleeves of your coat. You're tying your shoes and the bugs are coming off your shoelaces," said Trenton Allen, 32, of South Austin. "It's embarrassing because you never know when you're going to take them with you."

State and city agencies don't track bedbug cases in part because, until recently, officials hadn't received widespread reports. A smattering of cases began appearing in Illinois about 10 years ago, according to Linn Haramis, an entomologist with the Illinois Department of Public Health. "Five years ago, we started getting calls monthly. In the last year, we've been getting calls weekly," he said.

In August, calls began flooding into Moore's 49th Ward office. Some bug-bitten residents complained that when they called 311 operators didn't know where to refer them. The Chicago Department of Health doesn't handle complaints because bedbugs don't carry disease. "The system wasn't set up to deal with this unique problem," said Moore.

Another misstep occurred when city hearing officers deemed landlords in compliance after just

one visit from an exterminator, Moore said. Successful extermination requires multiple visits over weeks or months. According to the city code, landlords are only responsible for infestations that affect two or more units, but city inspectors are now cracking down and issuing citations if any bugs are found. "This is not as simple as sending the Orkin guy to spray in the corners," Moore said. "We need to educate the public, landlords and judges."

While city officials mobilize, tenants have been left to battle the bugs. The bites "felt like little pinches, like someone sticking you with a needle," said Tousant, the woman who first thought she had mosquito bites. "You're always looking for them. You don't eat. You can't sleep. You're always nervous. It messes up your mind."

After her landlord refused to send an exterminator, she began sleeping in the living room on an air mattress and keeping her clothing outside in plastic bags. She tossed out furniture, circled her bed with double-sided tape and started buying chemicals at the hardware store, employing a strategy of "eenie-meenie-minie-mo" to pick an effective pesticide.

This weekend—after six months of torture—she's moving out. "No one should have to live like this."

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