The Connecticut Library Consortium (CLC) coordinated a well-attended, half-day forum that took place on December 5 at Russell Library in Middletown. At the event, five speakers shared their expertise and insights in dealing with the issue of bed bugs in libraries.

First up was noted bed bug researcher Gale E. Ridge, entomologist at the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station in New Haven, which is part of the Connecticut State Department of Entomology. Gale put bed bugs in a historical framework; they have been around literally for thousands of years. After being nearly eradicated in the 1940’s they’ve made a comeback due to changes in trade and travel, pesticide use and resistance. Also ignorance and stigma has aided to the resurgence, when, for example, consumers purchase commercially available spray treatments that don’t work, i.e. ‘snake oil,’ that irritate bed bugs causing them to disperse further thus making them harder to eradicate.

Gale described bed bugs as ‘shy;’ they hide, come out to feed on blood, then they hide again. Although they are small, nymphs being the size of a grain of sand, they are visible to the naked eye. Fortunately, bed bugs do not transmit diseases. People have different physical reactions after having a bed bug feed on them; some people have no reaction, some get an itchy welt, while others get a rash. Gale said there is no way to determine if one of those conditions is specifically from a bed bug. Likewise, the bed bug itself looks similar to other bugs and proper identification of the insect is crucial. She said that in addition to hiring a trained professional, heat treating, with products such as a PackTite heating unit, and freezing are very effective for killing bed bugs.

Charlie Mastroberti is owner of Quest Pest Control. He explained how they use dogs, which have extreme sensitivity to scents that allows them to sniff out bed bugs and identify problem areas within a building. Handlers need to continuously reinforce training so that the dog remains able to sniff out only live bed bugs during an inspection. It takes a dog and handler about an hour to inspect a medium-sized library such as Russell Library. Should a library need a K9 inspection, he recommends more frequent inspections until no bugs are found, then less frequent inspections, such as twice a year. He said that since libraries are not conducive to an infestation he stays away from chemicals and prefers larger-scale heat treatments which have proven effective. If a library has not had an outbreak, he suggests that they might consider getting an inspection, say every other year, just to be on the safe side.
Jane Cullinane, Head of Preservation at the Connecticut State Library, spoke about the effects of various eradication treatments on library materials. She noted that libraries have collections of materials that includes more than books and that many items that are not paper based. Different parts of a library’s collection may need to be treated for pests in different ways. Should a library detect an insect in an item, the item should be put into a plastic bag to isolate it, but if not careful, other conditions can arise that cause further degradation of material, such as condensation which can occur if the sealed plastic bag is put in a hot environment. Jane said that heating to eradicate bed bugs is okay for a library’s circulating collection, while freezing is a better strategy for rare and valuable items, such as historical documents.

Chris Angeli, Head of Circulation Services at Russell Library, spoke about Russell’s experience dealing with bed bugs, including how they discovered them, how they addressed the issue, and the reaction when public became aware. They have regular K9 inspections and have been replacing chairs and desks with furniture that is less accommodating to bed bugs. Circulation staff is the first line of defense and they bag and isolate any suspect items. They also treat everything from their book drop in a PackTite heating unit. They have been and remain very up-front with the public and are willing to explain their proactive measures, even going so far as to demonstrate their PackTite for anyone who is curious.

Andrea Obston, Owner of Andrea Obston Marketing Communications and Adjunct Professor of Public Relations at Quinnipiac University, spoke about strategies to maintain the trust of library staff and the local community when dealing with a crisis, such as the discovery of bed bugs in the library. She talked about one-time crises and the much more prevalent slow growing situations and noted the importance of ‘golden hour,’ the first 48 hours after a crisis which sets the stage for how the event will play out. In the “Ten Commandments of Crisis Communication,” she stressed the need for the library to heed the warning signs of a crisis, to communicate through one person, to get out in front of a crisis, to tell the truth, and to avoid keeping the media at bay.

In talking about various tools, Andrea distinguished between a press release which is sent to media, put on the library’s website, and promoted in the library’s social media posts, and a press statement, which is short, released only in response to a question from the media, copied to stakeholders and influencers, and not posted on the library’s website or social media outlets. The post crisis stage is when the crisis is no longer the focal point of library management’s attention, trust is restored, and things return to business as usual, though there still needs to communicate and follow-up. On reflection of actions taken during a crisis, there should be a willingness to acknowledge mistakes and build support structures so that the library can better deal with another crisis.

The forum concluded with a question and answer period and demonstration of a PackTite heating unit. We are lucky to have the high level of expertise exhibited by this panel of speakers and kudos to Jennifer Keohane at CLC for arranging this worthwhile event. Attendees left the
session knowing more about bed bugs and how to deal with them and with strategies on how to successfully manage in a crisis. Knowledge is power indeed.