



Novogradac Journal of Tax Credits

News, Analysis and Commentary On Affordable Housing, Community Development and Renewable Energy Tax Credits

October 2014 • Volume V • Issue X

Published by Novogradac & Company LLP

Persistent Pest Problem Presents Opportunity for Innovation

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CENTRAL CITY CONCERN

Back in 2009, bed bugs were keeping Sean Hubert awake. As Central City Concern's chief housing and employment officer, Hubert was not only responsible for overseeing financing, design and major renovation work of the 176-unit Madrona Studios building in Northeast Portland, Ore., but he was also responsible for getting the studio units furnished. In 2008 and 2009, Central City Concern's maintenance team was dealing with chronic bed bug infestations as a resurgence of infestations swept through the United States.

"It was challenging," said Hubert, "and although our team ramped up quickly on the latest pest control methods and we educated tenants quickly on early detection and avoidance, we still were forced to throw away hundreds of traditional beds that were useless on the prevention end, great harborages for pests and difficult to treat. The bugs hide in box springs, mattress seams, bed frame joints and crevices, and inside standard metal tube frames. They tend to resurface after treatment with maddening regularity if you miss just a single hiding spot."

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Photo: Courtesy of Central City Concern

Central City Concern staff designed this bed-bug resistant bed for its own use in its affordable housing properties and eventually also began selling the bed to others.





Photo: Courtesy of Central City Concern

Central City Concern expanded its line of furniture to include a bunk bed, side table and a bed bug-resistant mattress.

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Bed bugs present problems at many levels. “As a developer and operator of affordable housing, we juggle a lot of needs across our portfolio. We work to keep tenants comfortable, costs reasonable, and operations as sustainable and green as possible. So, adding beds and mattresses that couldn’t be properly treated to landfills really went against all of our key principles,” Hubert said.

On the brink of purchasing new beds for the building, Hubert asked his team to search for a better product that was bed bug resistant. The search came up empty. Property and portfolio management staff, with extensive experience dealing with bed bug infestations, eliminated option after option. Hubert called for a brainstorming session: What features of a bed would work to combat bed bug infestations? Could design and materials result in a frame that would be resistant to bed bugs? Could treatment costs be reduced? What would a truly sustainable product look like?

The white board filled up fast and furiously: all metal construction, splayed legs to make it hard for bugs to get to the bed from the wall, paint that was hard for bugs to climb yet easy for people to spot if bugs present, no seams, no bolts, no tubular frame elements for bugs to hide in,

and no need for a box spring – a favorite nesting location of bed bugs. “Looking at the list, we knew those features weren’t out there in a single product. So, we decided to see if we could get one manufactured for our own use and possibly for use by others,” said Hubert.

The agency’s executive director, Ed Blackburn, gave a final vote of confidence to the team. “In our 30-plus-year history, Central City Concern has waded into other social enterprises - a handy man service, and a second-hand store to name a few. This seemed like something that we might be able to pull off,” said Blackburn.

Working with a Portland metal manufacturer, Central City Concern staff spent time tinkering with different approaches, and in a matter of months, the final design of the Central City Bed was completed. One hundred seventy-six beds for Madrona Studios, and another 44 beds for the on-site medical program, were built and delivered in time for Madrona Studio’s grand opening in March of 2010.

A number of funders and representatives from other affordable housing organizations were at the grand opening event, including Home Forward, Portland’s local housing authority. Home Forward was also completing

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a remodel at the time and its staff noticed the beds at Madrona Studios.

“They called us and asked about ordering 65 bed frames for their building and we knew we were onto something,” Hubert said. Central City Concern began successfully marketing the bed, and approximately three years later, the organization was granted a U.S. patent on the bed frame product (twin, full and queen). Staff also expanded the line of furniture to include a bunk bed and side table, and also sells a bed bug resistant mattress.

From the inception of the Central City Bed through July 31, 2014, Central City Concern has sold more than 2,200 bed bug resistant bed frames, 1,000 mattresses, and 550 side tables to customers across the country. Gross sales are just over \$1 million. Profits from the bed go back into Central City Concern’s employment programs, an area that has been traditionally underfunded.

“We’re proud to fill a very real need,” said Sarah Porter, Central City Concern’s social enterprise program manager.

“The Central City Bed is innovative and effective. Plus, people love that a non-profit organization created it.”

The agency is gradually incorporating the bed into all of its buildings and pest control needs have dropped dramatically.

“It’s a win-win for us,” said Ed Blackburn.

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Kathy Pape is director of communications for Central City Concern.

This article first appeared in the October 2014 issue of the Novogradac Journal of Tax Credits.

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ISSN 2152-646X

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