

Dogs sniff out bedbugs from G20 delegates' rooms

When G20 delegates are threatened by Toronto's bedbug infestation, a call goes out to the experts — scent-trained dogs

As delegates to next week's G20 summit check into their Toronto hotel rooms, some should feel safer knowing Michael Goldman's dogs have already secured the premises.

The dogs weren't sniffing for bombs. They were checking for bedbugs.

Goldman, of Richmond Hill-based Purity Pest Control, trained the world's first bedbug-sniffing pooch in 2005. He now has three canine experts in his arsenal. All are in demand throughout Southern Ontario, dealing with the growing problem of bedbugs.

On June 13, Goldman took inspector dogs Kody and Radar to a downtown on a pre G20 inspection at one downtown hotel, where guests are expected to converge for the summit of world leaders on June 26 and 27.

"They're a very proactive hotel," Goldman says. "We've done other inspections for them as well. They want to make sure their guests have a pest-free stay, so they're doing what they can to make sure that happens."

Critics have argued not enough is being done to battle bedbugs in Toronto, allowing them to spread rapidly across the city. Star columnist Joe Fiorito has argued the case on behalf of tenants of bug-ridden buildings since 2007.

A Toronto public health spokesman says the city has seen a resurgence of bedbugs, bloodsucking, wingless insects, in the last five years. The issue made headlines last week when it was revealed Etobicoke General Hospital was battling an outbreak.

That's no surprise to Goldman.

"Anywhere where people congregate you'll find bedbugs," he says. "They're in firehouses and EMS houses and movie theatres, transit, they're everywhere."

Goldman won't name the hotel — "There is confidentiality with every job we do" — but says it has had bedbug problems in the past.

"The hotel can only do so much, it's not their fault." The first guest at a brand-new hotel could bring one bedbug from a city like New York, Chicago or Niagara Falls, where the problem is much worse than Toronto, Goldman says. Most hotels, at least the ones with the brand-name to protect, have taught their housekeeping staff what to look for, he says.



Michael Goldman shows how sniffer dog Inspector Kody indicates a "find." First Kody sits to show he's on the trail and, when told to "seek" he will use his paw to show exactly where the bedbugs are.

DAVID COOPER/TORONTO STAR

Goldman started getting calls for bedbugs about eight years ago.

In 2005, he began training Kody, a mixed-breed dog he rescued from an animal shelter, to identify the bugs' scent and then "point" with his paw. He has since trained Alexa, a golden retriever, and Radar, an Australian shepherd, to seek out bedbugs and termites.

Although humans can see the live critters as well as their spent exoskeletons and fecal spots, it's no match for the superior capabilities of a dog's nose.

"If there is a bedbug behind the baseboard, I would never know about it," says Goldman. "In a hotel, for example, it would take a human inspector 45 minutes to come out with 35 per cent accuracy. You use a dog, you're in and out of that room in 60 seconds with about 95 per cent accuracy," he says.

Goldman charges \$300 and up for an inspection.

Training a dog to detect bedbugs starts when a puppy is about three months old. Goldman exposes the dog to a tin of the critters, teaching it to identify the scent of bedbugs, then makes a game of it, rewarding the dog with a treat for finding bedbugs.

"As you go along, you hide it in more difficult places," he says. "You make him really think."

Bedbugs were virtually wiped out in the 1950s, due to dioxin-laced pesticides and DDT, Goldman says. Since the pesticides were restricted, or banned in the case of DDT, bedbugs have been on a steady rise, he says. The class of pesticides exterminators can use, synthetic pyrethroids, can still kill an ant a week after it was sprayed, but does little to fight the mighty bedbug. “It’s just not working,” Goldman says.

Heat is an excellent tool — a clothes dryer set at “high” will kill all stages of bedbugs in clothing and sheets, Goldman notes.

For beds, he says the most effective preventive is a mattress encasement that is specifically designed to seal insects out — or in. Anything inside will die. “If you can get past the ick factor, knowing that there is potentially something alive in your mattress for the next couple of months, it’s a great tool,” Goldman says.

Though most of his calls are to maintain prevention, he’s helped people deal with major infestations. And, he says, it is possible to start again with a clean slate. “It’s a lot of work by the homeowner and if you don’t prepare properly and take it seriously, you’re just spinning your wheels,” Goldman says.

Lorraine Kayser, who manages a six-unit apartment building in Etobicoke, recently called in Goldman when a tenant was getting bites and feared bedbugs. A scent-search by Radar, one of his three dogs, ruled out an infestation.

“He got up on the bed, he got into the drawers and into the closets,” Kayser says of the sniffer-dog at work. “When he’s in work mode, he works. It was an interesting morning.”

Reach Barbara Turnbull at bturnbull@thestar.ca or [@barbturnbull](https://twitter.com/barbturnbull) on Twitter.