

HOARDING: *Issues for the Fire Service*

Many fire departments are experiencing serious fires, injuries, and deaths as the result of compulsive hoarding behavior. The excessive accumulation of materials in homes poses a significant threat to firefighters fighting fires and responding to other emergencies in these homes and to residents and neighbors.

Often, the local fire department will be contacted to help deal with this serious issue. Since studies suggest that between three and five percent of the population are compulsive hoarders, fire departments must become familiar with this issue and how to effectively handle it.

What is hoarding?

- Collecting or keeping large amounts of various items in the home due to strong urges to save them or distress experienced when discarding them.
- Many rooms in the home are so filled with possessions that residents can no longer use the rooms as designed.
- The home is so overloaded with things that everyday living is compromised.



Why do people become hoarders?

Hoarding is a mental disorder that can be genetic in nature, triggered by traumatic events, or a symptom of another disorder, such as depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, or dementia. Studies have found that hoarding usually begins in early adolescence and gets worse as a person ages. It is more common among older adults.

Why is hoarding an issue for the fire service?

- Hoarding can be a fire hazard. Many occupants die in fires in these homes. Often, blocked exits prevent escape from the home. In addition, many people who are hoarding are injured when they trip over things or when materials fall on them.
- Responding firefighters can be put at risk due to obstructed exits, falling objects, and excessive fire loading that can lead to collapse. Hoarding makes fighting fires and searching for occupants far more difficult.
- Those living adjacent to an occupied structure can be quickly affected when a fire occurs, due to excessive smoke and fire conditions.

In some communities, officials are asking landlords and property owners to inform the local fire service or building commissioner or inspector when they become aware of a hoarding situation that poses a fire safety risk to the occupant or neighbors.

What can the fire service do?

The fire service may become aware of a hoarding situation through emergency response or notification by another agency, family member, or neighbor. Knowing how to talk to the person who is hoarding and how to work with other professional groups and organizations to effectively deal with the occupant and the hoarding behavior is important. Keep in mind that people with compulsive hoarding behavior are intelligent and care deeply about their possessions. The following suggestions have been adapted from *The Hoarding Handbook: A Guide for Human Service Professionals* (Oxford University Press).

When talking to someone who is hoarding:

- Be respectful and show concern for the person's safety
- Match the language of the person. If the person talks about his "collection" or her "things", use that language. Avoid using derogatory terms, such as "junk", "trash", or "hoarding".
- Focus on safety issues, such as fires, fall hazards, and avalanche conditions. Note possible ignition sources or trip hazards and try to build support for addressing these issues instead of insisting on an immediate and overwhelming cleanup.
- Show empathy by indicating that while you understand that your presence is upsetting for the person, some kind of change is necessary.



Develop or join a Hoarding Task Force.

Hoarding Task Forces are developing all around the country. Your community may already have one. If not, begin a conversation with other agencies impacted by hoarding and discuss collaborating with them on future cases. Task Forces are usually established by service providers to gain knowledge about and insight into the problem of hoarding behavior, to share case information, and to develop intervention strategies. Some even serve as the intervention/response mechanism for hoarding situations.

Hoarding Task Forces are often made up of mental health providers, building representatives, community service providers, faith based organizations, the fire service, public health representatives, family members, and many others. Coordinated and collaborative interventions are more likely to bring about positive outcomes than individual agencies working alone or in conflict. Teamwork is imperative and mental health intervention is vital to effectively change this often dangerous behavior.

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Your Source for Safety Information

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