



# Hoarding and Fire: Reducing the Risk

Do you have a person in your life who may be a hoarder? Hoarding is a condition where a person has persistent difficulty discarding personal possessions. The large amount of possessions fill the home and prevent the normal use of the space. Living space becomes cluttered. It may be unusable. Hoarding brings distress and emotional health concerns.

## WHY HOARDING INCREASES FIRE RISKS

- Cooking is unsafe if flammable items are close to the stove or oven.
- Heating units may be too close to things that can burn. They might also be placed on unstable surfaces. If a heater tips over into a pile, it can cause a fire.
- Electrical wiring may be old or worn from the weight of piles. Pests could chew on wires. Damaged wires can start fires.
- Open flames from smoking materials or candles in a home with excess clutter are very dangerous.
- Blocked pathways and exits may hinder escape from a fire.

## HOW HOARDING IMPACTS FIRST RESPONDERS

- Hoarding puts first responders in harm's way.
- Firefighters cannot move swiftly through a home filled with clutter.
- Responders can be trapped in a home when exits are blocked. They can be injured by objects falling from piles.
- The weight of the stored items, especially if water is added to put out a fire, can lead to building collapse.
- Fighting fires is very risky in a hoarding home. It is hard to enter the home to provide medical care. The clutter impedes the search and rescue of people and pets.

## How Can You Help Reduce the Risk of Fire Injury

- ✓ When talking a person who hoards, focus on safety rather than the clutter. Be empathetic. Match the person's language. If they call it hoarding, then you can call it hoarding.
- ✓ Help the residents make a home safety and escape plan. Stress the importance of clear pathways and exits. Practice the plan often. Exit routes may change as new items are brought into the home.
- ✓ Install working smoke alarms in the home. Test them at least once a month.
- ✓ Reach out to community resources. Talk to members of the fire department to alert them of your concerns. They may be able to connect you with members of a hoarding task force for additional help.



Your Source for SAFETY Information

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# 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.

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## **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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