

Hoarding as a public safety issue

Hoarding creates hazardous conditions that can increase the risk of fire; structural damage to the home; and disease or injury to the hoarder, other household members, neighbors and the community. Extensive storage of items in the home severely limits the hoarder's day-to-day functioning.

Increased risk of fire:

The accumulation of combustible materials, such as newspapers, clothing and rubbish, can pose a severe fire hazard.

- The amount of combustible materials, when ignited, creates an extremely hot, fast-spreading fire that is difficult to suppress.
- Escaping the home in a fire can be impossible due to blocked hallways, doorways and windows.
- Public safety personnel access to the home can be hampered or blocked.

Increased risk of structural damage:

The volume of hoarded items, often stacked from floor to ceiling, is extremely heavy and impose structural loads up to 500% above the minimum design load. Structural damage threatens the occupants, public safety personnel and adjacent buildings or townhouses. Overloaded floors or attics can cause permanent structural damage such as;

- Sagging floors and ceilings
- Cracked floor joists or roof trusses
- Compromised bearing walls and
- In extreme cases, partial collapse of the structure

Increased risk of disease, injury and infestation:

The storage of hoarded items makes cleaning nearly impossible, which can lead to unsanitary living conditions and increases the risk of disease.

- The lack of regular home maintenance can result in the loss of running water, heat or refrigeration
- Toilets and sinks may be unusable or inaccessible
- Stacked items are a falling or tripping hazard which can cause injury to the occupants or public safety personnel
- Accumulated garbage can lead to rat and insect infestation



Other selected brochures and information available from Code Enforcement:

- Accessory Dwelling Units
- Checklist For Good Neighbors
- Clean Air - Puget Sound Clean Air Agency
- Commercial Signs
- Dispute Resolution Center
- Frequently Asked Questions - Code Enforcement
- Graffiti
- Home Occupations
- Junk Vehicles
- Mold - Environmental Protection Agency resource, references and tips on prevention and remediation
- Neighborhood Issues
- Nuisance Violations
- Outdoor Burning is Out - Puget Sound Clean Air Agency
- Pet Waste - Snohomish Health District
- Rats: Snohomish Health District
- Snohomish County Housing Authority Housing Rehabilitation Loan Program
- Summary of the Residential Landlord-Tenant Act of Washington
- Trees
- West Nile Virus - Snohomish Health District

Hoarding Website Resources:

www.mayoclinic.com/health/hoarding
http://understanding_ocd.tripod.com/hoarding
www.squalorsurvivors.com/squalor/hoarding
www.psychiatrictimes.com/display/article
www.ocfoundation.org/hoarding
<http://westsuffolkpsych.homestead.com/hoarding.html>
<http://sophia.smith.edu/~rfrost/hoard-disabl.html>
www.bio-behavioral.com/hoarding.asp
www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dpwes/trash/hoarding/

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City of Edmonds
Development Services
Code Enforcement

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Hoarding

Definition
Behavior
Public Safety issues
Website Resources



Hoarding



The purpose of this brochure is to provide basic information on hoarding along with other potential resources to help understand and address the issue.

What is hoarding?

Hoarding is defined as the acquisition of, and inability to discard worthless items even though they appear (to others) to have no value. Most hoarding behavior is found in people with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

Compulsive hoarding is not just an enthusiast's passion for collecting, tinkering or fixing up. A hoarder may have immense difficulty throwing anything away, from the oldest paper clip, to a used food container, to an out-of-date newspaper, for fear that they may need those items in the future. Their homes are often full of stuff that the rest of us would call "junk". The most commonly saved items include newspapers, magazines, old clothing, bags, books, mail, notes and lists.

Along with difficulties in throwing things away, compulsive hoarders have severe difficulties making decisions, perfectionism, and avoiding tasks. To prevent making a mistake, they will avoid or postpone making decisions. Even the smallest task may take a long time because it has to be done "right". The net result of these high standards and the fear of making a mistake is that compulsive hoarders avoid doing many tasks, because everything becomes tedious and overwhelming.

An inordinate amount of time may be spent "churning" moving items from one pile to another but never actually discarding any item nor establishing any consistent organizational system. Many compulsive hoarders have limited social interactions. The nature of their problem makes them socially isolated. They are frequently too embarrassed by their clutter to have people come to their home, sometimes for many years.



Hoarding behavior

Definition of clinical hoarding:

1. The acquisition of, and failure to discard, a large number of possessions that appear to be useless or of limited value
2. Living spaces are cluttered enough that they can't be used for the activities for which they were designed
3. Significant distress or impairment in functioning caused by the hoarding.

Hoarding has three components:

1. Acquiring possessions compulsively - compulsive buying or collecting free things.
2. Saving all these possessions and never discarding.
3. Not organizing and maintaining all the saved possessions.

People who hoard, keep things for the same reasons as anyone else:

- For sentimental value- emotional attachment or to remember an important life event.
- For utility value - the item is, or could be, useful.
- For aesthetic value - the item is considered to be attractive or beautiful

The most likely justification for keeping an item:

- Future need - ("I might need this someday")
- Lack of wear or damage ("This is too good to throw away")
- Sentimental saving - ("This means too much to me to throw away")
- Potential value - ("This may be worth something someday")

The difference between people who hoard and people who don't, is that hoarders apply these values to a far larger number of items.

A hoarder will also be very concerned about maintaining control over their possessions. Well-meaning family members who try to help by sorting and purging the clutter on the hoarder's behalf are likely to find their good deed has an unanticipated result: an increased effort on the part of the hoarder to protect their stuff from "unauthorized touching".



Signs of hoarding

- Extreme collection and storage of items in home and yard.
- Accumulation of combustible materials (newspapers, etc.)
- Blocked exits (doors/windows)
- Narrow pathways in home
- Rat and/or insect infestations
- Rotting food and/or used food containers
- Human and/or animal waste
- Long-term neglect of home maintenance
- Non-working utilities, such as heat, running water, sewer and refrigeration

When you suspect hoarding.....

If you suspect a hoarding situation in your neighborhood, it is recommended that you do not attempt to solve the person's hoarding problem. Also, do not offer to clean up the house. The best action you can take is to contact the Snohomish County Hoarding Task Force at 425-290-1275.

If you think a family member might be hoarder, it is recommended you seek professional help for that person or professional guidance for yourself in handling the situation. Generally speaking, hoarders may have a mental illness or a medical condition that needs evaluation and treatment. Hoarders are unaware that their lifestyle is a problem and rarely seek treatment. Typically it is difficult to change this type of behavior without professional assistance. Consult a mental health or medical professional, or contact the Snohomish County Hoarding Task Force for recommendations.

Working with hoarders

Hoarding does not recognize race, gender, nationality, level of education or socio-economic bracket. Treating compulsive hoarding often proves difficult because people that hoard often don't see it as a problem.

The homes of people who engage in compulsive hoarding usually offer telltale clues that something's wrong. Countertops, sinks, stoves, desks, stairways and virtually all other surfaces are stacked with stuff. And when there is no more room inside, the clutter may spread to the garage, vehicles and yard.

When the clutter begins to spread outside and becomes a concern to neighbors is generally when government or other social agencies are contacted. Often, the first contact is the health district or code enforcement officer for the jurisdiction. Hoarding also comes to the attention of government agencies through the various social service agencies that may be utilized or contacted by concerned relatives or neighbors.