

# HOARDING:

## A Dangerous Secret



A Report from the  
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Hoarding of objects and animals is a significant problem facing the Washington, DC metropolitan region. This behavior not only impacts the hoarder and the surrounding community, but is also a problem for local governments. Government agencies are currently struggling with how to investigate and intervene in these situations and how to effectively coordinate a response from multiple agencies. A survey of local governments in the metropolitan region was completed by a regional Hoarding Project Team, brought together by the George Washington University Institute for Regional Excellence in cooperation with COG, which examined hoarding in the region and reviewed the local policies and procedures regarding hoarders.

## WHAT IS HOARDING?

Hoarding (or compulsive or pathological hoarding) is a term which is used to describe extreme hoarding behavior in humans. It involves the collection or failure to discard large numbers of objects or animals, even when their storage causes significant clutter and impairment to basic living activities such as moving around the house, cooking, cleaning or sleeping. While there is no current agreed upon definition of compulsive hoarding in accepted diagnostic criteria, most experts describe the following defining features:

- The acquisition of, and failure to discard, a large number of possessions (objects or animals) that appear to be useless or of limited value
- Living spaces sufficiently cluttered so as to preclude activities for which those spaces were designed
- Significant distress or impairment in functioning caused by the hoarding

There is no "cure" for compulsive hoarding, meaning there is no treatment that will make the problem go away completely and never come back at all. Research on the psychopathology of hoarding has helped define the components of this problem, but as yet, little is known about age and reasons for onset, family history, course of this disorder, and insight into the problem. To date, only a limited number of laboratory studies have been conducted examining cognitive, emotional, and behavioral features of compulsive hoarding.

## WHY IS HOARDING IMPORTANT?

Hoarding is a complex and multifaceted behavioral problem that may make itself known in a number of different ways. Hoarding creates a number of health and safety hazards. Hoarding homes may exhibit a range from simple clutter to ones that require a HAZMAT response. Hoarding creates hazardous conditions that can increase the risk of fire and block entry by public safety personnel. The accumulation of combustible materials, such as newspapers, clothing and rubbish, can pose a severe fire hazard. The amount of combustible materials 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. In addition, public safety personnel's access to the home can be hampered or blocked. Additionally, hoarding may cause structural damage to buildings. Hoarding can present significant health hazards and can cause disease or injury to the hoarder, family members and the community. Hoarding can be a potential indicator of mental health problems such as OCD and dementia. Finally, clean-up of hoarding homes can be extremely costly for landlords and local governments.

## HOARDING SURVEY

A survey form (see Appendix A) was compiled to solicit specific information on hoarding from local government officials residing in COG's 20 member jurisdictions in suburban Maryland, Northern Virginia and the District of Columbia. The survey asked a series of questions about the respondents' knowledge of and experience with hoarding and, more specifically, how their local governments responded to cases of hoarding. In addition, the survey looked at whether local governments coordinated intervention in hoarding cases among the various relevant agencies.

Approximately thirty-four individuals from fifteen COG member local governments responded to the online survey. Respondents represented a variety of local government agencies including animal control, police, fire, housing, code enforcement, health, social services and adult protective services.

Results from the 2006 Regional Hoarding Survey show 235 reported cases of hoarding in the D.C. region in 2005. Reported cases included both object and animal hoarding. Cases were reported from a variety of local government departments. Care was taken to eliminate possible duplication of hoarding case reports. The numbers presented represent the most conservative estimate possible from survey data received. Several jurisdictions reported that there is no formal tracking of hoarding cases across departments. It is likely that the number of cases reported under represent the actual number of hoarding cases in each jurisdiction. Therefore it is possible that the actual frequency of hoarding case in the region is much higher. Additionally, the cases reported represent only those cases that have come to the attention of a local government agency.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our analysis, the following recommendations are presented on how the Washington metropolitan region can best address the hoarding problem. As hoarding is a multi-faceted issue requiring multi-faceted responses, effective interventions require a community-coordinated response. A coordinated response allows for a more effective and comprehensive response to hoarding in a jurisdiction. Hoarding is a complex and multifaceted behavioral problem that may make itself known in a number of different ways. Hoarders may express themselves by hoarding objects or animals. Hoarders themselves may be young or elderly. Hoarding homes may exhibit a range from simple clutter to ones that require a HAZMAT response. Therefore, in order for a jurisdiction to effectively deal with this issue, all of the agencies that may either discover, intervene or treat hoarders must coordinate their response.

A coordinated response, however, will likely vary depending on the size of the jurisdiction and the likely number of hoarding cases they may respond to over time. Coordinated responses may range from hoarding related agencies sharing information via phone or email as they arise to coordinating a response through a lead agency to forming a Hoarding Task Force that meets on a regular basis. Education and training regarding the multi-modal aspects of hoarders and hoarding behavior for all government agencies involved in a coordinated response is also an important consideration. Cost savings can result from a lack of duplication of resources. In addition, a coordinated response allows greater ongoing information sharing that increases the chances that hoarders may be identified earlier, potentially lowering health and public safety impacts, as well as helping to decrease the potential for recidivism behaviors among known hoarders.