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The Fairfax County Hoarding Task Force

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Case Study

The Fairfax County Hoarding Task Force

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Educational Objectives

1. Describe the reasons for forming the Fairfax County Hoarding Task Force.
2. Explain the organizational make-up of the Hoarding Task Force.
3. Understand the risk factors in hoarding and what is being done to address them.

Background

Hoarding is the excessive collection and retention of possessions (inanimate or living) to the degree that it may interfere with day-to-day functions, such as home, health, family, work, and social life, and with the safety of others. In 1998, four homeless persons seeking shelter entered a vacant, two-story, brick dwelling on Mount Vernon Highway in Fairfax County, Virginia, and set up house. The dwelling was already littered with so much debris that a safe exit in an emergency was

questionable. Nevertheless, they settled in and began using an open fire as their main source of heat and light; and they accumulated more. Excessive accumulation of papers and possessions, combined with unsafe heating practices, eventually resulted in a structure fire which took the lives of the four people. In consequence, Fairfax County created the Hoarding Task Force.

Shortly after this tragedy, in early 1999, a second event took place at a home in the Annandale area of Fairfax County that involved a family of six: two adults and four children. In response to a 911 call, police officers found a home with an excessive amount of combustible materials and personal possessions that blocked the egress and rendered the structure unsafe for human habitation. They notified the Fire and Rescue Department, because Fire and Rescue personnel may, under the Statewide Building Code, enter a property without either consent or under exigent (emergency) circumstances, if life-safety issues are in question.

The on-duty Fire Marshal determined that the current prevention

statutes and codes required that the premises be vacated. Fire and Rescue Department staff coordinated with other County agencies to provide relief services to the family. Child Protective Services assisted in obtaining shelter for the children, and the Health Department tackled the issues of open food containers, unsanitary conditions, and lack of house maintenance. Zoning Enforcement stepped in to address the poor exterior condition of the dwelling, as well as the excessive storage. Agencies such as the Department of Public Works and Environmental Services and Adult Protective Services also played a role in ensuring the safety of the occupants. In this case, a quick and well-coordinated response meant that a tragedy was averted.

The Task Force Begins

In 1998 and 1999, agencies were only beginning to understand the scope of the hoarding problem in Fairfax County. Although many agencies dealt with issues of poorly maintained properties, cluttered living conditions, and persons in stressful living situations, each agency had generally pursued

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compliance or intervention within the constraints of its own agency and authority. As the lead agency on hoarding matters, the Fire and Rescue Department realized that a multi-agency task force would be a better way to address this growing problem. It identified the following as key principles to having a successful hoarding task force, and these continue today:

- 1) Each agency that has an interest in a hoarding incident must have an understanding of the services and capabilities of other responding County agencies.
- 2) Hoarding behavior patterns can create extremely unsafe living conditions for the owner/occupant and affect the surrounding neighbors. In many cases, by the time authorities become aware of a hoarding incident, extreme action is often warranted to protect life, health, and safety.
- 3) A comprehensive, multi-agency approach would best serve the interests of the owner/occupant and other citizens.
- 4) Significant staff resources and assets are needed for even the most minimal involvement in an incident. Enforcement, follow-up, remediation, and court action require many more hours than a typical violation and there is no guarantee that the hoarding behavior will not reoccur.
- 5) To provide a reasonable chance that intervention will benefit both the owner/occupant and the community; a compassionate, professional, and coordinated approach must be developed.

And so, the Fairfax County Hoarding Task Force was created in 1998 as an ongoing interagency team

whose mission is to coordinate all County actions related to severe hoarding cases in Fairfax County. The Hoarding Task Force must balance the rights of the individuals against the safety of the community in developing strategies to deal with hoarding cases and ensure consistency in approaches among all entities involved in these cases.

Hoarding Task Force Objectives

- Develop and maintain procedures for dealing with moderate to severe hoarding that assertively use compliance strategies to deal with properties that, because of hoarding behavior by occupants, may be in violation of safety codes.
- Develop approaches or procedures for managing hoarding cases after initial intervention in order to monitor recurrence of unsafe conditions and take appropriate steps when warranted and feasible.
- Address and recommend solutions to related issues and concerns, such as how to obtain initial evidence to secure an affidavit and obtain a warrant, and how to clean up properties where owners will not take action.
- Recommend training and education for staff, as well as outreach and education to the general public about what County services are available.

Member Agencies in the Task Force

Department of Code Compliance (DCC) is responsible for enforcing the Virginia Maintenance Code Chapter (VMC), which establishes minimum housing standards, occupancy limitations, and other requirements and enables DCC to

cite violations of the VMC, obtain inspection warrants, if required, and declare dwellings as unsafe or unfit for habitation.

Fire and Rescue Department is responsible for enforcing the Virginia Statewide Fire Prevention Code, which grants fire marshals the authority to evacuate an unsafe structure, take actions to help bring a structure into compliance, and ensure the safety of the public and emergency response personnel.

Department of Family Services' Adult Protective Services (APS) and Child Protective Services (CPS) and social workers interview and assess the risk and needs of children and adults.

Community Services Board, Office of Mental Health Services Mobile Crisis Unit (MCU) provides clinical consultation to the Hoarding Task Force. When a case can be made that a person has a mental illness and there exists a substantial likelihood that the person will, in the near future, cause serious physical harm to himself or others or suffer serious harm due to lack of capacity to protect himself from harm or to provide for basic human needs, MCU can facilitate involuntary psychiatric hospitalization.

Program for Older Adults and Families offers outpatient mental health evaluation, treatment, and case management to persons age 60 and older who voluntarily want help to stop their own hoarding behavior.

Adult Clinical Services Program provides an ongoing psycho-educational therapy group for adults ages 18-59 who suffer more serious

mental illness. These individuals have a psychiatric diagnosis, hoard to an extreme degree, and voluntarily want help to stop hoarding.

Department of Neighborhood and Community Services (NCS) is the clearinghouse that assists in coordinating services provided by non-profit and faith-based organizations to persons or families involved in a hoarding situation. NCS can provide emergency and basic services, such as food, clothing, shelter, and financial assistance on a temporary basis.

Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) administers the Home Improvement Program, which provides a residential owner with home loan assistance and/or contact information for home repair contractors.

Health Department enforces Chapter 46 of the Fairfax County Code, "Health or Safety Menaces," which addresses a number of conditions that might endanger the health or safety of residents, such as rat and rodent infestations, improperly stored or disposed garbage, and insect infestations of public health importance.

Department of Public Works and Environmental Services (DPWES) becomes involved when a property condition is considered unsafe.

When occupant safety is in question, the Building Official must be notified and an engineer must make a determination as to the structure's integrity. DPWES provides on-site engineering and code knowledge to assess the immediate and long-term integrity of a structure, which are critical in determining the neces-

sary corrective measures to ensure safe use. DPWES also provides the needed resources to implement immediate compliance measures; e.g., heavy equipment is often necessary to remove the accumulation of waste and debris. During emergency intervention, DPWES's labor force is able to remove environmental or physical hazards that pose an immediate threat.

Office of the Sheriff ensures the safety of other County staff with on-site law enforcement, assists in the documentation phase, identifies criminal activity, and provides resources not available to or beyond the scope of other participating agencies.

Office of the County Attorney provides the vital link between the response, enforcement, and the law. The County Attorney's Office ensures that the Hoarding Task Force members are aware of and sensitive to the rights of the individual. If court action is necessary, participation by the Office of the County Attorney in the early stages of a hoarding response protects the individual's rights.

Office of Public Affairs receives information on high profile cases from the Hoarding Task Force and then disseminates the information to the media.

Animal Services Division, Fairfax County Police Department (ASD) supplies situation control at a hoarding site through the management of animals whose disposition is suspect, protection of the public from feral animals, and reassurance to the owner/occupant on the care of their "pets" during transition and

treatment.

Police Department can provide both a safety role and historical information on the property and its owner/occupant.

Board of Supervisors (BOS) is represented by several supervisor staff aides on the Hoarding Task Force.

Town of Vienna Police Department and Zoning Enforcement staff participate on the Hoarding Task Force as relevant and needed.

Town of Herndon participates in inter-jurisdictional matters and information sharing, as needed.

Why Is Hoarding a Public Safety Issue?

Fairfax County recognizes hoarding as both a mental health issue and a public health issue. The County experiences almost 200 official reports of hoarding annually.

Hoarding seems to occur across socioeconomic levels, races, genders, and ages. Hoarders who are older may have accumulated for a lifetime or may have become hoarders in later life after some event or crisis. At its most extreme, hoarding presents life-safety and health challenges that should not be ignored. Cluttered living spaces impede day-to-day activities. There is often no uncluttered place to sleep, move, cook, or toilet. Hoarders acquire and fail to discard a large number of possessions, such as a massive collection of newspapers, magazines, clothing, household trash, and animals. They become emotionally attached to their belongings. Ironically, those who hoard are often signifi-

cantly distressed or impaired by the conditions in which they live. The accumulation of combustible material, trash, food, and/or animals creates serious personal safety, fire, and health hazards and can cause disease, vermin, and/or insect infestations. These life-safety and health issues affect the hoarder, but can also endanger neighbors, public safety personnel, and the general public. The excessive weight of belongings in a hoarder's townhouse, for example, has caused structural damage to roof beams and floor joists in adjoining townhouses.

The most common impacts to health and safety resulting from long-term hoarding are those that violate laws and ordinances that were enacted to ensure the safety of the public and the preservation of property. In Fairfax County, those laws and ordinances are found in the Statewide Fire Prevention Code, Virginia Maintenance Code, the Health and Safety Menace Code, Zoning Ordinance, and animal control laws and regulations.

Large amounts of combustible material limit not only an occupant's means of escape during an emergency, but also the ability of public safety or rescue personnel to get inside the home. Homes with severe hoarding conditions suffer far more extensive damage during a fire emergency, because the amount of combustible material inside obstructs doorways and windows and causes a significant time delay in firefighting. In many hoarding cases, the heating equipment no longer functions because heating vents and equipment are blocked. Occupants may then use kerosene

or space-heaters for warmth. These, in turn, placed amidst the debris, pose an immediate fire hazard. Hoarders tend to store things throughout the house. In kitchens, hoarders may place newspapers, trash, mail, new unopened purchases, bags of plastic bags, and other things atop stoves, tables, refrigerators, chairs, and any available space, making seating and food preparation difficult. Some hoarders cook on stove tops, nonetheless. The accumulation of grease, food items, and trash greatly increases the potential for a fire and encourages rodent and insect infestation. As mentioned, hoarding cases almost always involve structural overload conditions. The volume and weight of newspapers, boxes, and magazines, can lead to severe overstressing of structural members, such as joists and beams. One room with stacked newspapers can cause floor systems to sag, crack, or even collapse.

Lastly, animal hoarding poses a serious health hazard to a home's occupants and to the animals that may have been collected, such as cats, dogs, rabbits, and other pets. An overpopulation of animals in a small environment, such as a single-family dwelling, can lead to starvation, disease, accumulation of feces, and the decomposition of the remains of dead animals.

Case Study #1

Mr. and Mrs. G. lived alone in a single family dwelling in a semi-rural part of Fairfax County. Mr. G., 87 years old, was in poor health with cardiovascular issues that limited his mobility. Mrs. G., 85 years old, was relatively healthy and alert.

They have a son within the county but see him infrequently. The Hoarding Task Force became involved after a 911 call to the Fire Department for a medical emergency involving a cardiovascular event of the male occupant in the early morning hours. The public safety responder to the scene identified the hoarding situation and reported it to the Department of Code Compliance (DCC). Most of the dwelling was filled with a variety of goods, trash, and newspapers with limited access ways to the front and rear doors. The DCC forwarded this report to the Hoarding Task Force for review. Based on an inspection of the dwelling by the staff and a report of the residents' physical health, it was determined that Mr. and Mrs. G. did not have either the physical capacity or sufficient funds to initiate a thorough clean-up of the property. As a result, the DPWES, in coordination with the local member of the Board of Supervisors, arranged to have a roll off container located on the property for several days as part of a community clean-up effort. During this time friends/family of the couple contacted by the son were able to clear out much of the debris in the dwelling to a level to make the dwelling fit for habitation. The roll off was removed and staff from APS met with the couple to arrange counseling as to the dangers of hoarding.

Case Study #2

Ms. V. was a middle aged woman, a periodically employed professional, who lived alone in a large and expensive town house in eastern Fairfax County. Based on complaints of debris and trash in the

house, seen both on the porch and grounds and clearly through the windows, the DCC and the Fire Department responded to the dwelling and found an extreme hoarding situation, with a large accumulation of debris and trash. The DCC forwarded this situation to the Hoarding Task Force for review. Due to her age (over 18 and under 60), Ms. V. was not eligible for assistance from APS and she refused any assistance from mental health providers. Several re-inspections of the town house by the staff confirmed that that the resident could best be served by establishing a long-term one-on-one relationship with staff of the DCC and the Fire Department. This long-term relationship witnessed some progress, some regressions, and progress again, with the staff inspecting the property on a regular basis and monitoring trash removal. These joint efforts resulted in her cleaning up the dwelling to a livable condition in about a year.

Conclusion

The multi-agency Fairfax County Hoarding Task Force has fostered stronger lines of communication among many relevant entities and a better understanding of the available resources and limitations that each brings to the task of hoarding abatement and regulatory compliance. Moreover, the Task Force has improved the abilities of its members to identify residents at risk, i.e., a blighted property report received by DCC may be the first indication that other quality of life issues may need to be addressed. While the Hoarding Task Force allows the County to mount a coordinated, organized response to

hoarding cases, the County must turn to the judicial process at times for final resolution. Staff always works with residents to gain voluntary compliance first, but in some cases court action is required. Many County agency missions mandate that they address the concerns of displaced and destitute residents; however, agencies are seldom able to assist where assistance is not welcomed or wanted. Unless an investigator can impress upon the owner/occupant the need for assistance, compliance must be achieved through the court system. Safety and the eventual return of the resident to the dwelling are the primary goals of the Hoarding Task Force.

The Fairfax County Hoarding Task Force began operations in 1998 and embarked on a path to improve services by enhancing intake processes, cross-training technical staff to promote code efficiencies, improve collaboration with numerous sister agencies, and promote code compliance in the community by outreach and education. Hoarding is a multifaceted problem that has psychological, physical welfare, and public safety implications. The formation of a multi-agency task force allows for consolidated resources and ensures an integrated approach to the physical, emotional, health, and safety issues associated with hoarding, and assists in the general well-being of all residents of Fairfax County.

Study Questions

1. What characteristics of hoarding behavior can make hoarding a risk for the hoarder and for the hoarder's neighbors?

2. Why did Fairfax County decide to develop a multi-agency Hoarding Task Force?
3. How does the Hoarding Task Force try to achieve a balance between the rights of the individual and the safety of the community?

About the Author



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Compliance and a long-time member of the Hoarding Task Force. Read more about the Task Force at www.fairfaxcounty.gov/code/hoarding/hoarding-task-force.htm.