

Special Needs Housing – Housing for Persons with Special Needs “Thinking Outside of our Boxes” – Hoarding Awareness and Assistance

Overview

The challenges in the administration of rental housing are ever-changing. The services that residents needed twenty years ago are not the same services that residents may need today. MassHousing believes strongly that to create healthy and sustainable housing communities – the Agency must not only address social issues (such as sober housing, 504/ADA compliance, housing for clients of the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation, violence prevention, and drug and alcohol addiction) – but also take the time to listen and to learn where the greatest or most challenging needs lie.

An issue that has grown in significance – and which has been featured on reality television, as well as newspaper and magazine articles – is hoarding. Hoarding is the acquisition of, and inability to discard items even though they appear to others to have no value. Hoarding can be a very serious health and safety issue, not only for someone with a hoarding disorder, but also for neighbors and municipal and public safety officials who may be confronted with a hoarding situation.

In an article by Kayla Webley, in Time Magazine’s edition of April 26, 2010, the author explains that, “There are between 6 and 15 million hoarders living in the U.S...(in these homes) narrow pathways referred to as “goat trails” wind through piles of stuff and stacks of things cover sofas and beds, rendering furniture useless.” Imagine this problem in a rental housing situation. This is not your average tenant issue – and it cannot be solved through traditional methods.

The Call to Action

Residents who have this problem face threats to their housing stability (most eventually lose their housing), and to their health as a result of falls, the dangers posed by lack of egress in emergencies as well as the obvious issues of mold and vermin-related health problems because of the refuse in their homes. For residents with a hoarding problem, living spaces are sufficiently cluttered so as to preclude activities for which those spaces were designed. This is, in turn, the cause of significant distress and/or impairment to the tenant, other tenants, visitors, and the property owner.

It is estimated that hoarding affects about 5% of the population, but how does a property manager know when a resident’s behavior is over the line? And as importantly, where can a property manager turn for help? MassHousing has tackled the issue head-on by involving experts in the fields of housing, social work, health care, mental health, elder affairs, housing law and public safety. The Agency’s goal is to provide property managers with the basic information they need to both assess and address a hoarding issue.

From the housing property manager’s perspective, hoarding is a costly problem, sometimes resulting in tens of thousands of dollars in costs related to eviction and cleanout. Education, assessment, coordination and access to resources can mitigate these expenses at minimal costs.

MassHousing first partnered with clinicians and academics to provide hoarding training for its housing site staff. As hoarding cases became a serious problem across the state, MassHousing also took a leadership role by organizing a multi-disciplinary Hoarding Conference in 2007. As a follow-up to this, in 2008, MassHousing began work to organize a Statewide Steering Committee on Hoarding (SSCH).

The Steering Committee’s goals include educating statewide players to the problems of hoarding, and engaging them to work collaboratively in order to be able to implement practical solutions to hoarding issues.

The Approach Toward Implementation

Led by MassHousing, the SSCH has established and accomplished significant strategic objectives since its creation. First and foremost, is the implementation of the *HOMES® Multi-disciplinary Hoarding Risk Assessment*. *HOMES®* is a quick and easy-to-use innovative tool that allows users to identify hoarding risks relating to Hhealth, Obstacles, Mental health, Endangerment (to children, elders, or persons with disabilities), and Structural and safety issues. *HOMES®* puts all of these various risk factors in one place, on a two-page form.

This new multi-disciplinary risk assessment tool was developed with wide input and has been successfully put into practice. *HOMES®* provides a structural measure through which the level of risk in a hoarding environment can be conceptualized by providing an initial and brief assessment of the nature and parameters of the hoarding problem. A visual scan of the environment and a conversation with the person(s) in the home is a useful way to determine the effect of the clutter/hoarding.

The tool can be used by housing managers, health departments, elder services, Department of Mental Health or Department of Children and Families’ workers or anyone who, at first encounter, believes a hoarding issue is present. *HOMES®* also allows these individual specialists to conceptualize issues that may traditionally be outside of their purview. For example, a service provider may not recognize the risk of eviction and homelessness, and a housing provider may be less attuned to certain health risks. Understanding the variety of risks posed by hoarding can help everyone take a more effective approach to the person’s situation. Following the *HOMES®* assessment, a plan from which further action may be taken can be organized and could include immediate intervention, additional assessment or referral.

Already, there have been requests from across the country to copy and use the *HOMES®* tool.

Using Technology to Advance Awareness

Another important tool, the Hoarding Resources webpage on MassHousing’s website, was established. Updated hoarding resources, training and research opportunities, general information, tools, assessments, forms, Massachusetts resources, steering committee and local Task Force information, Massachusetts codes and legal information as well as links to self-help, treatment and other helpful sites can be found at www.masshousing.com/hoarding. Users can also request posting of training, research and treatment opportunities or list new resources.

Thus far, the SSCH has convened six regional training meetings across the state which have been attended by almost six hundred participants. These meetings bring together a wide array of public health and safety professionals, personnel from courts, housing managers, clinicians, social service professionals and others. As a result of these efforts as well as additional outreach by the SSCH, new local hoarding task forces have formed and begun to meet. Participants at the county, regional and municipal level are working on starting their own task forces with partners met at the regional trainings. MassHousing is offering free start-up technical assistance to these new task forces.

Training the Trainers

A new comprehensive Hoarding Training curriculum including basic and upper level hoarding courses has been established as part of MassHousing’s Tenant Assistance Program (TAP) Management Training Program. One hundred and fifty-five participants attended the three TAP hoarding courses last year, which led MassHousing to develop more advanced trainings to follow the basic course.

Additionally, a day-long basic training, Hoarding Basics: What You Need To Know About Hoarding taught by Dr. Christiana Bratiotis of Boston University’s School of Social Work and Jesse Edsell-Vetter of Metro Boston Housing Partnership, continue as an entry level course. Four half-day second-level courses are available to those who have taken the basic overview. These courses focus on a particular aspect of hoarding: Effective Communication with a Person Who Hoards, Legal Issues Related to Hoarding; and two effective intervention courses, one Intervention: Approaches to Cleanouts and the other, Intervention: Assessment and Plan Development. In addition, TAP will offer a half-day Hoarding Case Roundtable, led by Dr. Bratiotis and attorney Debbie Pilch. Open only to people who have taken the basic course and at least one second-level course, this forum will provide an opportunity for people to explore issues and ways of handling their own cases, anonymously of course. This new curriculum will at least double the ongoing training opportunities.

The overarching challenges of dealing with tenancy problems requires working within the legal framework, while creating a housing community environment that offers residents what they need in order to succeed as tenants. Hoarding continues to be a challenging issue for public health and safety, the courts, housing managers, clinicians, social service professionals and others. It is a complex problem that requires inter-disciplinary solutions. MassHousing’s approach to stabilize and enrich affordable housing developments that are home to various special needs populations, including hoarders, is helping to assist housing professionals and affiliated personnel to better address resident compliance issues and preserve tenancies.