

Special Achievement

“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.

Randy Frost, PhD and Gail Stekette, PhD have twenty years of expertise in the field of hoarding and are dedicated to helping the victims of this disorder. Frost is a psychology professor at Smith College and the author of dozens of hoarding related publications. Stekette is currently a professor and dean at the Boston University School of Social Work, also specializing in hoarding and OCD issues. MassHousing is fortunate to collaborate with these two internationally respected professionals to help property managers and owners recognize and deal with tenants in the Agency’s portfolio who have hoarding tendencies.

In their 2010 book, *“Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things”* they relay stories of hoarders and their daily struggles. Of one victim they wrote, “The pile of newspapers could easily tip over and crush him. Most of the doors were packed shut. The front door opened only partway, requiring her to turn sideways to enter. She could barely navigate the narrow pathways. He would never get out alive if his house caught on fire.” (p 138).

Imagine this situation in a rental setting. 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.

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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) that continues work currently.

The Steering Committee’s goals include educating statewide players to the problems of hoarding, engaging them to work collaboratively in order to be able to implement practical solutions to hoarding issues and supporting the development and efforts of local Hoarding Task Forces throughout the state.

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.

Training and Local Empowerment

Thus far, the SSCH has facilitated the training of over 2,300 professionals, including almost 600 participants alone at six regional training meetings across the state convened to 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, the number of local Hoarding Task Forces has grown from seven in October of 2007 to twenty in October 2010. Participants at the county, regional and municipal level are working on starting their own

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task forces with partners met at these trainings. MassHousing is offering free start-up technical assistance to these new task forces, including on-site assistance.

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. 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. This new curriculum has doubled the ongoing training opportunities.

Most recently, MassHousing partnered with Community Health Consulting and initiated a “therapeutic decluttering” program, piloted in a few areas of the state. With clinical support, case managers trained in hoarding provide services on site in the apartments of people who hoard. Early reports from this ten week treatment module indicate slow, but successful progress, helping to avoid build up to a crisis situation while maintaining safe tenancies.

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.

HOMES[®] Multi-disciplinary Hoarding Risk Assessment

Health

- | | | | |
|--|---|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cannot use bathtub/shower | <input type="checkbox"/> Cannot prepare food | <input type="checkbox"/> Presence of spoiled food | <input type="checkbox"/> Presence of insects/rodents |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cannot access toilet | <input type="checkbox"/> Cannot sleep in bed | <input type="checkbox"/> Presence of feces/Urine (human or animal) | <input type="checkbox"/> Presence of mold or chronic dampness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Garbage/Trash Overflow | <input type="checkbox"/> Cannot use stove/fridge/sink | <input type="checkbox"/> Cannot locate medications or equipment | |

Notes: _____

Obstacles

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cannot move freely/safely in home | <input type="checkbox"/> Unstable piles/avalanche risk |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Inability for EMT to enter/gain access | <input type="checkbox"/> Egresses, exits or vents blocked or unusable |

Notes: _____

Mental health (Note that this is not a clinical diagnosis; use only to identify risk factors)

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Does not seem to understand seriousness of problem | <input type="checkbox"/> Defensive or angry | <input type="checkbox"/> Unaware, not alert, or confused |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Does not seem to accept likely consequence of problem | <input type="checkbox"/> Anxious or apprehensive | |

Notes: _____

Endangerment (evaluate threat based on other sections with attention to specific populations listed below)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Threat to health or safety of child/minor | <input type="checkbox"/> Threat to health or safety of person with disability |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Threat to health or safety of older adult | <input type="checkbox"/> Threat to health or safety of animal |

Notes: _____

Structure & Safety

- | | | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Unstable floorboards/stairs/porch | <input type="checkbox"/> Leaking roof | <input type="checkbox"/> Electrical wires/cords exposed | <input type="checkbox"/> No running water/plumbing problems |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Flammable items beside heat source | <input type="checkbox"/> Caving walls | <input type="checkbox"/> No heat/electricity | <input type="checkbox"/> Blocked/unsafe electric heater or vents |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Storage of hazardous materials/weapons | | | |

Notes: _____

HOMES[®] Multi-disciplinary Hoarding Risk Assessment (page 2)

Household Composition

of Adults _____ # of Children _____ # and kinds of Pets _____
Ages of adults: _____ Ages of children: _____ Person who smokes in home Yes No
Person(s) with physical disability _____ Language(s) spoken in home _____

Assessment Notes: _____

Risk Measurements

Imminent Harm to self, family, animals, public: _____
 Threat of Eviction: _____ Threat of Condemnation: _____

Capacity Measurements

Instructions: Place a check mark by the items that represent the strengths and capacity to address the hoarding problem

- Awareness of clutter
- Willingness to acknowledge clutter and risks to health, safety and ability to remain in home/impact on daily life
- Physical ability to clear clutter
- Psychological ability to tolerate intervention
- Willingness to accept intervention assistance

Capacity Notes: _____

Post-Assessment Plan/Referral

Date: _____ Client Name: _____ Assessor: _____

HOMES[®] Multi-disciplinary Hoarding Risk Assessment

Instructions for Use

- **HOMES** Multi-disciplinary Hoarding Risk Assessment provides a structural measure through which the level of risk in a hoarded environment can be conceptualized.
- It is intended as an *initial* and *brief* assessment to aid in determining the nature and parameters of the hoarding problem and organizing a plan from which further action may be taken-- including immediate intervention, additional assessment or referral.
- **HOMES** can be used in a variety of ways, depending on needs and resources. It is recommended that a visual scan of the environment in combination with a conversation with the person(s) in the home be used to determine the effect of clutter/hoarding on **H**ealth, **O**bstacles, **M**ental Health, **E**ndangerment and **S**tructure in the setting.
- The Family Composition, Imminent Risk, Capacity, Notes and Post-Assessment sections are intended for additional information about the hoarded environment, the occupants and their capacity/strength to address the problem.