

# **You Can Be a Hoarding Specialist!**

By Sheryl Vito, MSW -OC Adult Protective Services  
in collaboration with Mark Odom, LCSW, Service Chief II  
OC Health Care Agency Older Adult Services

**1. Educate yourself.** Visit the many websites, read books, talk to others, attend the O.C. Hoarding Task Force Meetings to learn about why people hoard things and techniques you can employ to assist the person who hoards.

I would recommend: <http://www.hoardingtaskforce.org/>

**2. Be aware of health and safety issues** you face when entering a hoarder's home. Be sure to learn the precautionary steps you should take to protect your personal health. Perhaps it may be best to meet the hoarder outside.

**3. Be compassionate and do not make judgmental statements.** Understand that no matter how overwhelming the level of hoarding you face, the creator of the mess is a human being and needs to be treated as such and their collections have value to them i.e., do not call a stack of papers "trash" as this will be detrimental to your relationship with the hoarder. Adapt to and use the language of the person who hoards.

**4. Be aware of the challenge ahead.** Persons who hoard possess the ability to rationalize their accumulations and acquisitions—you will not win any argument. Do not cajole, intimidate or threaten. Use open-ended questions and motivational interviewing techniques. Focus on the client's needs. Express your concern about their health and safety as well as their desire to live in their own residence for as long as possible.

**5. Familiarize yourself with the Institute for Challenging Disorganization Clutter Hoarding Scale.** This is the tool you will need to identify the level of hoarding in your hoarder's home and it will provide you with a common language to discuss this with other stakeholders who are willing and able to assist in the recovery process. Website: <http://www.challengingdisorganization.org>

**6. Compile contact information** for the following agencies (stakeholders) in your target area

- a. Adult Protective Services and Child Protective Services hotline numbers
- b. Mental Health Agencies – make note of their hours of operation
- c. Code Enforcement—include the supervisor's name and days/hours of operation
- d. Fire Department – make note of the Chief's name
- e. Police Department – identify if there is a community liaison officer
- f. Animal Control- make note of days/hours of operation
- g. Vector Control- same as above and the name of the inspector assigned to your area.
- h. Community based social workers
- i. Other stakeholders who can contribute to the success of the effort

**7. If you are a stakeholder representative, have a team meeting.** Hoarding is such a multifaceted issue that no single individual or agency can resolve all the issues that result from the hoarding behavior. Older hoarders have even more problems and potentially complicating factors than younger people who hoard. Depending upon the situation, the group of stakeholders may be large or small.

The goal of this meeting is to

- develop an intervention plan
- discuss roles and responsibilities
- identify resources
- agree to goals and time frames

**8. Confidentiality.** Remember that confidentiality is key to protect, respect and to avoid liability issues when sharing information regarding individual hoarder. Discuss all client related issues in a private setting. If a private setting is not an option, refrain from giving identifiable information during the meeting. Use a pseudonym i.e., Ms. A or identify the hoarder by name of the street they live on. Have all stakeholders sign OC Hoarding Task Force confidentiality agreements.

**9. Meeting with the hoarder** to discuss the service plan. If the intervention plan requires you to meet with the person who hoards, meet in a manner and location most suited to be beneficial to the individual who hoards. Would he or she be more receptive to one or two persons in the group better than meeting with all of the key stakeholders?

**10. Work from a Harm Reduction perspective.** The health and safety of the individual (and the community) is the primary goal—not the reduction of the belongings. If necessary, enforce harm reduction by using a team approach of an enforcer and a helper to motivate the client take action to reduce the harm of too much stuff.

**11. Continue to be supportive** and encourage the person who hoards as they work on their recovery.

**12. Repeat** any of the steps listed above to accomplish your end goal of assuring the hoarder's safety and those who live with or nearby the hoarder.

**AND FINALLY, CONSIDER KEEPING STATISTICS** In addition to the steps offered to assist you with a hoarding situation, this step is offered to help you. The following statistics are needed on persons who hoard:

- Basic demographics (age, location, education, income, etc.)
- money spent on an intervention i.e., via time, mileage and other costs

Your statistics may influence the need to change policies and procedures, and gain funding to better assist and improve the manner in which we work together.