

# Maryland State Firemen's Association

## Fire Prevention and Life Safety Committee

### TIP Sheet: Hoarding Safety



## Hoarding Safety and Prevention Steps

*The Maryland State Firemen's Association Fire Prevention and Life Safety Committee wants to bring to our memberships attention to a very serious condition that the fire/EMS service has to deal with in an emergency and in a non-emergency situation in your community.*

*Hoarding is a Compulsive Disorder that is a pattern of behavior that is characterized by excessive acquisition and an inability or unwillingness to discard large quantities of objects that cover living areas of the home and cause significant distress or impairment.*

*Please share the following information with your membership and community to help support in our educational efforts*

#### **Why is hoarding an issue for the fire service?**

- Hoarding is a HAZZARD for the occupants and for the Fire/EMS service. Many of the occupants have injured themselves or have died in these fires due to the high load of materials found within the home.
- Responding firefighters and EMS members can be put at risk when calls come out for these locations. Risks are obstructive exits, falling objects and excessive fire loading that can lead to collapse. Hoarding makes firefighting fires and searching for the occupants very tough.
- It's important as a department that we help our community understand why it's important to help our residents that suffer from this illness.
- By simple steps we have listed here is a great start to help support your community and your residents that need the help.
- Recent media coverage of hoarding has also increased awareness and interest among sufferers, family members, and human service personnel who often deal with the problem.
- Be respectful to the community that you're speaking to and the understandings of their well-being.
- Many who hoard call their items collections. They do not see the items as trash and they feel that the items are very special and need them to function.
- When speaking to them you should match the language that they are using. It helps by using their terms that they describe their "Collection" or "Things". This helps you gain trust to the individual and when speaking with them they will help to begin to understand the need to clear out their clutter.
- Don't be afraid to learn how to help facilitate education and training of your members. Reach out to your communities human service personnel including mental health, social services, public health and housing officials to help your department support your community with proper education and support needs.

#### **When Speaking on Hoarding think of the following:**

- Hoarding has been a hidden disorder for many years. Before the early 1990's, there was little research on hoarding.

**THE OFFICIAL LIST OF  
DO'S AND DON'TS  
FOR HELPING HOARDERS**

	Do's	DON'TS
<i>Communication</i>	<b>CONNECT WITH THE HOARDER</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understand the hoarder's state of mind</li> <li>Offer unconditional support</li> </ul>	<b>INSULT OR MAKE FUN OF THE HOARDER</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider the hoarder's fragile mental state</li> </ul>
<i>Privacy</i>	<b>ENSURE THE PROCESS WILL BE PRIVATE</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Neighbors, friends, and other family members do not have to get involved</li> <li>Be sure whomever is helping can provide anonymity (eg. unmarked vehicles, equipment, uniforms)</li> </ul>	<b>DISCLOSE INFORMATION WITHOUT ASKING</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most hoarders are embarrassed of their condition and shut down should others become aware</li> <li>By sharing a hoarder's information, the all-important bond of trust is broken</li> </ul>
<i>Safety</i>	<b>MAKE SAFETY THE KEY CONCERN</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Highlight the safety issues first before discussing removal of items</li> <li>Assess structural damage to protect the hoarder after the project is complete</li> <li>Wear proper Personal Protective Equipment when necessary</li> </ul>	<b>IGNORE THE HEALTH HAZARDS</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hoarders come to terms with letting go of certain items when they are made aware of the health hazards</li> <li>Failure to wear protective gear could result in exposure to disease or injury during cleanup</li> </ul>
<i>Proper Handling of Items</i>	<b>AGREE THE ITEMS ARE IMPORTANT</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Each item has an emotional connection to the hoarder</li> <li>Whether trash, donation, or keepsake, stress the importance of each item and how it is to be handled</li> </ul>	<b>SAY, "LET'S GET RID OF ALL THIS STUFF!"</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hoarders may appear like mounds of "junk", but to the hoarder they are prized possessions</li> <li>By mishandling the hoarder's possessions, <i>relapse is unavoidable</i></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Trash</li> </ul>	<b>DISPOSE OF GARBAGE SAFELY</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Biohazard materials (eg. bodily fluids, excrement, animal waste, carcasses, hazmat) should be handled by Biohazard Specialists</li> <li>Call local municipality with questions on disposing appliances, tires, carpeting or other large or potentially hazardous items</li> </ul>	<b>THROW EVERYTHING IN ONE GARBAGE HEAP</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hazardous materials should be handled by biohazard professionals and/or the proper authorities</li> <li>Be sure to separate garbage from recyclable materials</li> <li>Be sure to properly bag and contain garbage before disposal</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Donations</li> </ul>	<b>PROMOTE DONATION</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hoarders cope easier when parting with their items when they know the items can be used or appreciated by someone with greater need</li> <li>Keep in mind: while some have excess material items, others have nothing</li> </ul>	<b>IGNORE ITEMS THAT MAY BE USEFUL</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Though the hoarder may not have use for some of the excess items in their home, useable items should be donated to a worthy cause.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Keepsakes</li> </ul>	<b>HIDDEN TREASURES</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It is easy to forget that there are usable, valuable items amidst the mess and clutter</li> <li>Teach about valuing collectibles and useful items</li> </ul>	<b>SELL/GIVE AWAY/TAKE HOARDERS' VALUABLES</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hoarders have valuables like everyone else. While the process promotes parting with most of the hoarded items, a hoarder must re-learn how to truly value keepsakes and useful items</li> </ul>
<i>Seek Professional Guidance</i>	<b>HIRE PROFESSIONALS</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A professional hoarding cleaning service can supply all of the resources necessary for a successful hoarding cleaning project</li> <li>Professional hoarding cleaning services offer invaluable advice and tips on organizing and sorting, preparing the hoarder for life after cleanup</li> <li>In some instances, involving a counselor to help with the mental and emotional issues tied to hoarding is essential to the healing process</li> </ul>	<b>TAKE ON THE PROJECT ALONE</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hoarding cleanup can be stressful. By losing one's patience with the process will cause relapse or a disconnect in the process.</li> <li>Hoarding cleaning can be a traumatic experience for the hoarder. Ensure a professional is present to field questions and concerns to make the process stress-free and successful</li> </ul>

