

How to Handle Hoarding: a Special Presentation

By Victoria Hecht

SVAR Communications and PR Specialist

COLONIAL HEIGHTS – Mally Mason knew that hoarding would soon come to the forefront of fair housing law in 2011 when she watched an episode of A&E Network’s “Hoarders” featuring a California man whose collection literally ran him out of the house.

What began as a couple of caged pet rats morphed into more than 2,500 – living in the walls, chewing away at the mattresses, crawling on him as he ate and slept – until they overran his home, forcing the collector to begin sleeping in his shed. Still, the man wept when the animals were humanely removed from his home, one by one, in individual cages.

“What really struck me is the intensity of the man’s emotion as they took the rats out of the house,” said Mason, Fair Housing training specialist for the Virginia Department of Professional and Occupational Regulation, during the class “Hoarders, Hoarding and The Virginia Fair Housing Law” offered this month to the public by the Southside Virginia Association of REALTORS®.

Mason’s prediction after watching the cringe-worthy episode proved correct: In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) recognized hoarding – or disposophobia – as a mental disorder and, as such, a disability. Thus, those who hoard are considered a protected class under the Fair Housing Act, which prohibits discrimination in housing on the basis of race, color, gender, religion, familial status, national origin or disability.

America’s fascination with the disorder, spawned by “Hoarders” and a second cable series, “TLC’s Hoarding: Buried Alive,” may be recent, but the disorder’s ramifications hit too close to home for family and friends of those who hoard, landlords and property managers who have tenants who hoard and, of course, the hoarders themselves.

According to the APA, up to 5 percent of the population displays symptoms of clinical hoarding. That’s more than 350,000,000 worldwide and, in the United States, over 16,000,000 people. To gain perspective, that’s more than three times the amount of Americans living with Alzheimer’s disease, according to Alzheimer’s Association figures.

Hoarding, defined as the excessive collection of items, along with the inability to discard them, goes far beyond simply having “too much stuff,” and may create cramped living conditions so extreme that homes may be filled to capacity with narrow pathways winding through stacks of clutter. Some people, Mason said, also collect animals, keeping dozens or more pets in unsanitary conditions.

According to the International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry, hoarding is a chronic and progressive condition, often beginning early in life; 50 percent of hoarders grew up with a family member who hoards.

Hoarders, Mason said, are most commonly senior-aged women, noting, "If seniors lived during the Depression, they're likely to believe it could happen again." The age demographic is particularly important, she added, because of the growth rate of that population segment; seniors represent 20 percent of Americans.

About 75 percent of hoarders engage in excessive buying, according to Randy Frost, professor of psychology at Smith College and author of "Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things," while 50 percent excessively acquire free items – think promotional items and "freebies" at events. But, though they may be drowning in their possessions, don't stereotype hoarders as dirty or disheveled in appearance, Mason said.

"A lot of hoarders look neat and well dressed. What you don't know is that they got up at 4 a.m. to search for their clothes," she said.

Common causes for hoarding include trauma, emotional attachment, self-worth issues, decision-making deficit, and issues with responsibility and waste, Mason said. Hoarders may also be battling major depression, general anxiety or obsessive-compulsive disorder. In some who have suffered loss, "Things become people's friends – they don't die or go away."

Hoarding becomes a problem, Mason said, when it becomes a safety and health issue. And, when the hoarder is a renter, the clutter is not just a code violation, but a lease violation, too. The violations may include hoards so extreme that they block exits, are fire hazards, render rooms unusable for their intended purposes and attract infestations of pests. Animal-hoarding violations include excessive numbers of animals, damage and unhealthy conditions caused by their waste.

For landlords and property managers dealing with a hoarder, there is no quick solution, Mason said. They should consider all avenues to avoid eviction and work with the individual – within reasonable accommodation – to bring the rental up to code. That may include establishing deadlines for the tenant to clean up and bring the housing into code compliance, and making disposal bins available. She suggested landlords and tenants strive to listen without judgment, treat the hoarder with respect and dignity, and recognize small steps of progress in eliminating clutter with the focus on safe and sanitary conditions within the dwelling.

Class participants left the two-hour class with insight into hoarders' minds and situations, and advice on how to help and address loved ones who hoard. Real estate professionals, including REALTORS® and property managers, received step-by-step instruction on handling hoarding situations.

"I think a lot of times it doesn't start out as hoarding, but as depression – where they feel unloved and shop all the time," said Cordie Baird, an associate broker with Napier REALTORS ERA® in Colonial Heights. "This was an excellent class. So many people are oblivious to the reasons behind hoarding and think it's just laziness."

Added Jennifer McCrary, a REALTOR® with Harris & Associates in Chester, “If you watch the shows and only watch the shows, you don’t understand. You can’t, because you don’t know what the hoarder feels.”

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Victoria Hecht is the communications and public relational specialist for the Southside Virginia Association of REALTORS®. Reach her at vhecht@svarealtors.com.