

Crowd-sourced Best Practices for Working with Hoarding and Cluttering in PSH

Overall, dealing with tenants who are hoarders requires a delicate balance of empathy, professionalism, and legal compliance. By following these best practices and operating protocols, you can help manage the situation effectively while also respecting the tenant's needs and privacy.

One definition of hoarding is “the acquisition of and failure to discard possessions that appear to be useless or of limited value, accompanied by living spaces sufficiently cluttered so as to preclude activities for which those spaces were designed and significant stress or impairment in functioning caused by the hoarding. People with hoarding behaviors sometimes do not acknowledge that they have a problem and often refuse help with resolving issues due to hoarding.” (from MHASF) It is both a registered mental disorder that warrants clinical intervention and a serious concern for property management.

What follows are some best practices and operating protocols designed to help manage the situation effectively:

- 1. Establish clear expectations:** Set clear expectations from the start of the tenancy regarding cleanliness, safety, and maintenance of the property.
 - During the initial meeting with tenants, housekeeping should be discussed and the tenant advised on how to get help with housekeeping, including how to access housekeeping supplies.
 - Explain that a unit will fail an inspection due to safety issues related to clutter including blocking egress and pest control issues.
 - Monthly or weekly unit condition checks should be discussed as needed and in consultation with the case management team.
 - Review unit condition expectations and any concerns at a 30 day check in for new tenants.
 - Review housekeeping expectations regularly at community meetings and gatherings. Reiterate that expectations and standards are to help protect the well-being of all residents and the safety of the building.
 - Post visual images of what a room needs to look like to pass inspection. (see chart below provided by MHASF)

- Care should be taken to discuss expectations regarding standards of housekeeping in non-judgmental trauma informed ways.

- 2. Distinguish between poor housekeeping and hoarding:** Tenants who are frail or in poor health or who are experiencing a crisis of some kind can become unable to maintain a unit properly and will accept help from service providers, case managers, and outside resources to help them maintain compliance with housekeeping standards.
- 3. Be proactive:** Regularly inspect the property to identify any signs of hoarding. If you notice any problems, address them with the tenant as soon as possible. It's important to address the issue before it becomes a safety hazard or creates problems with neighbors.
 - Talk with tenants during inspections or follow up with them shortly after. Share any concerns staff or the tenant have. Find out what may be causing them stress and what they think is in their way of their being able to meet housekeeping standards. (motivational interviewing can be an effective way of working with tenants who have cluttering or hoarding behaviors.)
 - Implement ways to encourage the change that is needed such as good housekeeping certificates, "healthy" unit competitions and acknowledgements for when a unit passes after failing previously. Avoid blaming and work on building trust.
 - Stay on top of maintenance needs every month, put in work orders for things that need attending to; blinds, furniture, holes in wall, etc. Ensure that maintenance repairs are completed in a timely manner. Identify sources of funding for regular deep cleans as needed.
 - Issue a "fix it ticket" in rooms you plan to re-inspect so that tenants are clear about what needs to be done. Ensure tenants know where they can get cleaning supplies and support.
 - When habitability issues persist, services staff and property management should work with tenant to develop a roadmap of a doable way forward. Set reasonable housekeeping goals and steps for the tenant to take to get their unit into compliance. Help break down tasks to avoid overwhelm.
 - If issue is complex, issue a letter of concern about behavior. Reach out to tenant to set a date with them to meet.
 - If the building experiences a pest infestation in multiple units, there should be an emergency plan in place with property supervisor, services lead and pest

control provider that could include additional inspections, additional cleaning resources and a clear targeted plan for the most cluttered and impacted units.

4. Engage services team and outside resources:

- Service staff should do additional pre monthly inspection visits to help struggling tenants get ready for inspections and can check units weekly as part of their engagement with the tenant.
- Service staff should be involved during monthly inspections, even if not walking the unit.
- Make sure immediately after inspections to debrief and make initial plans for follow up and include pest control technicians.
- Strategize on laundry support needed, including how to incentivize on site laundry use or access to services with free laundry days or outings to the laundromat.
- Plan what to do if community resources are not available for deep cleaning or access to laundry services is not available. Identify what alternative resources can be accessed in a timely manner.
- During or after inspection, offer storage containers, bed extenders/underbed storage, garbage bags, additional shelving and other simple fixes. Work to exchange cardboard boxes for plastic bins because of pest issues.
- Are there any possible physical modifications to unit that could help? For instance, painting a line on walls to show the maximum height to which belongings should be stacked can be a helpful visual tool for tenants.
- During meetings with service staff, determine eligibility for IHSS and other support. Determine if tenants are using resources to capacity. APS can assess and help facilitate IHSS.
- Proactively engage in the Reasonable Accommodations process if it can be used to give tenants more time to comply with required standards or can support tenant in other ways.
- The MHA Peer Responder program can help determine whether outside peer support teams are working with the tenant.
- The Department of Public Health's Environmental Health team can be contacted to inspect and assist in encouraging change.
- Review plan weekly with team to measure success and troubleshoot barriers for tenant in reaching and maintaining compliance.

5. **Communicate effectively:** Approach the tenant with empathy and understanding. Explain the risks of hoarding, such as fire hazards, structural damage, and health concerns, and discuss the steps that need to be taken to address the issue.
 - Hold formal case conference with the tenant, property management and services team and outside supports. Create written agreements with tenant on how and when progress/change will take place. Incentivize progress. Utilize harm reduction principles and trauma informed practices. Closely monitor progress with tenant.

6. **Document everything:** Keep detailed records of all communication, inspections, and actions taken to address the hoarding. This will help protect you legally and ensure that you're following the appropriate protocols.

7. **Protect the tenant's privacy:** While you need to address the hoarding for the safety of the tenant and the property, it's important to respect their privacy and dignity. Only share information on a need-to-know basis and avoid discussing the issue with others who don't need to be involved.

8. **Provide special training:** Staff who interact with tenants should receive special training on hoarding behavior, treatment, and management options to mitigate health and safety issues that hoarding can cause.
 - There should be a staff member or other resource available who has been well-trained and has expertise with hoarding who can guide and provide assistance when working with tenants who have hoarding behaviors. Training is crucial in order to avoid triggering trauma and exacerbating the behavior, causing tenants to refuse help.

9. **De-stigmatize poor housekeeping and hoarding:** Processes should be developed within the community to reduce feelings of shame and help negate avoidance and denial behaviors that impede support.

10. **Involve tenants in decision-making:** It is recommended that the person with hoarding behaviors be directly involved in and supported in making decisions about disposing of belongings.
 - Cleaning out, organizing, or discarding a hoarder's possessions without consent, except in life-threatening situations, addresses the symptom rather than the decision-making problems behind hoarding and can be very traumatic.

Verbal De-Escalation Techniques for Defusing or Talking Down an Explosive Situation

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When a potentially verbally and/or physically explosive situation occurs, verbal de-escalation is needed.

There are two important concepts to keep in mind:

1. Reasoning logically with a very angry person is not possible. The first and only objective in de-escalation is to reduce the level of anger so that discussion becomes possible.
2. De-escalation techniques do not come naturally. We are driven to fight, flight or freeze when confronted by a very angry person. However, in de-escalation, we can do none of these. We must appear centered and calm. Therefore these techniques must be practiced before they are needed so that they can become “second nature.”

There are 3 parts to be mastered in verbal de-escalation:

A: THE PERSON IN CONTROL OF HIM/HER SELF

- Appear calm, centered and self-assured even though you don't feel it. Relax facial muscles and look confident. Anxiety can make the client feel anxious and unsafe which can escalate aggression.
- Use a modulated, low monotonous tone of voice (our normal tendency is to have a high pitched, tight voice when scared).
- If you have time, remove necktie, scarf, hanging jewelry, religious or political symbols before you see the person (not in front of him/her)
- Do not be defensive-even if the comments or insults are directed at you, they are not about you. Do not defend yourself or anyone else from insults, curses or misconceptions about their roles.
- Be aware of any resources available for back up and crisis response procedures.
- Be very respectful even when firmly setting limits or calling for help. The agitated individual is very sensitive to feeling shamed and disrespected. We want him/her to know that it is not necessary to show us that they must be respected. We automatically treat them with dignity and respect.

B: THE PHYSICAL STANCE

- Never turn your back for any reason
- Always be at the same eye level. Encourage the person to be seated, but if he/she needs to stand, you stand up also.
- Allow extra physical space between you – about four times your usual distance. Anger and agitation fill the extra space between you and the person.
- Do not stand full front to person. Stand at an angle so you can sidestep away if needed.
- Do not maintain constant eye contact. Allow the person to break his/her gaze and look away.
- Do not point or shake your finger.
- DO NOT smile. This could look like mockery or anxiety
- Do not touch – even if some touching is generally culturally appropriate and usual in your setting. Very angry people may misinterpret physical contact as hostile or threatening.
- Keep hands out of your pockets, up and available to protect yourself. It also demonstrates non-verbal ally.
- Do not argue or try to convince, give choices i.e. empower.
- Don't be defensive or judgmental.

C: THE DE-ESCALATION DISCUSSION

- Remember that there is no content except trying to calmly bring the level of anger down to a safer place.
- Do not get loud or try to yell over a screaming person. Wait until he/she takes a breath; then talk. Speak calmly at an average volume.
- Respond selectively; answer all informational questions no matter how rudely asked, e.g. “Why do I have to do this g-d homework?” This is a real information-seeking question). DO NOT answer abusive questions (e.g. “Why are all teachers (an insult?) This question should get no response what so ever.
- Explain limits and rules in an authoritative, firm, but always respectful tone. Give choices where possible in which both alternatives are safe ones (e.g. Would you like to continue our discussion calmly or would you prefer to stop now and talk tomorrow when things can be more relaxed?)
- Empathize with feelings but not with the behavior (e.g. “I understand that you have every right to feel angry, but it is not okay for you to treat myself or others this way.)
- Do not solicit how a person is feeling or interpret feelings in an analytic way.
- Do not argue or try to convince.
- Wherever possible, tap into the person's thinking mode: DO NOT ask “Tell me how you feel. But: Help me to understand what your are saying to me” People are not attacking you while they are teaching you what they want you to know.

- Suggest alternative behaviors where appropriate e.g. “Would you like to take a break and have a cup of water?”
- Give the consequences of inappropriate behavior without threats or anger.
- Represent external controls as institutional rather than personal.
- Trust your instincts. If you assess or feel that de-escalation is not working, STOP! You will know within 2 or 3 minutes if it’s beginning to work. Seek help and follow crisis response plan.

There is nothing magic about calming a very angry or agitated person. You are transferring your sense of genuine interest in what the person wants to tell you, of calmness, and of respectful, clear limit setting in the hope that the person actually wishes to respond positively to your respectful attention.