

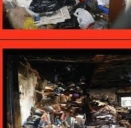
Hoarding and Heavy Fire Conditions

Lt. Zach Polvino – October 2019

Hoarding is slowly becoming a major concern across the United States, and right here in our community. Hoarding has become mainstream with its exposure from TV shows, such as Hoarders on A&E. Hoarding has major impacts on the community, including a major impact on emergency services, specifically the Fire Department. We, as a Fire Department, are expected to perform life-rescue and fire suppression. Hoarding presents a different and unique set of challenges.

Hoarding Overview

Hoarding is considered a mental disease. It is more than just being cluttered or messy; it is a compulsive disorder that often manifests itself as a compulsive need to acquire and keep objects and things even if they are broken, worthless, hazardous or unsanitary. This includes materials others consider to be trash. Extreme hoarding conditions pose significant life safety concerns for both the occupant, as well as emergency crews. Safety concerns include entrapment, entanglement, large volumes of flammable materials, inaccessible spaces of the structure, structural support issues, and biohazardous materials.

Heavy Content Rating Scale	
Level 1 Small Noticable Clutter	
Level 2 Interior Pathways Common Exterior Access	
Level 3 Interior Pathways Limited Exterior Access	
Level 4 Limited Interior Pathways Minimal Exterior Access	
Level 5 No Access	

Hoarding affects all types of people. There is no differentiator between education levels, wealth, race, or gender. Hoarding can be observed in all types of neighborhoods and wealth classes.

Compulsive hoarders suffer from a chemical imbalance that influence behavior. Part of that behavior includes being protective of their stuff, and property regardless of perceived value. This behavior sometimes can be defensive, or violent behavior. Hoarders feel a deep connection to these materials, and often struggle or down right refuse to clean or remove them from the space. Additionally, hoarders will often deny entry into their property for a variety of reasons. Some of these reasons may include shame or guilt. There is a definite 'Collect and Protect' mentality. Other feelings include a lack of trust with outside agencies, or people for fear of judgement. Occasionally, hoarding can be accelerated due to a traumatic experience in life, which may be exacerbated by other mental disorders such as depression, and anxiety. Other behaviors

associated with hoarding include alcohol abuse/dependency, paranoia, anti-social tendencies, and avoidance traits. Hoarders often create delusional realities for themselves to justify their

hoards and behaviors. Hoarders, despite all the negative impacts they present their family, neighbors and the community, are a vulnerable segment of the population. They are at a greater risk for fires, devastating medical emergencies, and many other situations that can drive their mental state into deeper stress.

Hoarding creates life-safety issues for the occupants and responders.

Impacts on Firefighting Operations



Clearly, hoarding conditions will impact firefighting operations. From the sheer volume of materials inside the structure, to deep seated fires obscured by piles of materials, attempting to advance hose lines over piles of materials, to searching for life we will have our hands full. Tactically, these fires may require many more hands – likely additional alarms for relief purposes. Other tactics include alternate access points, such as cutting away below a window to open an entryway.

Ryan Pennington, a Lieutenant with the Charleston Fire Department in West Virginia has spent about 5 years studying these fires. As part of his class at FDIC, Ryan also shared some other tactical considerations such as using a Thermal Imaging Camera to thoroughly scan the piles. Piles of materials can hold and trap heat making advancing in increasingly difficult. Hose lines with smooth-bore nozzles, such as our standard pre-connects may provide extended reach and penetration to the deeply seated fire. These fires are usually oxygen-starved as air inlets are often blocked. The best tactic to extinguish is to saturate the piles of materials with large amounts of water. Remember Gallons Per Minute will win. Exterior vertical and horizontal ventilation may also be challenging as access to the structure may be limited, but also windows will be blocked or occluded with materials. Ventilation is critical to a successful firefighting operation, however due to these fires being oxygen-starved, ventilation needs to be tightly coordinated between the interior crews, command and outside-vent crews.

As firefighting operations continue in hoarder homes, it is also imperative that the structure is assessed and reassessed for structural stability. The structure is likely already compromised due to the additional weight of the hoarding piles, and any portions of the house that are in disrepair, such as broken floor joists, sagging floors, and a compromised roof system.

From the outside of the structure, often vegetation is overgrown and blocks access, both visual and physical. This may be one of the outward signs that points to hoarding conditions on arrival as part of size-up. Additional indicators may include the house, or structure itself being in disrepair, cars in the driveway that are also full of 'stuff'. Upon doing a 360 view of the structure, piles of materials in the side and back yards, often covered with tarps or other temporary protective enclosures. Once there is not enough room inside, the piles move outside. As these piles grow, both inside and outside, egress is very limited, or blocked.



Snyder Fire responded in 2010 to a 'Collyers Mansion' fire on Lafayette Blvd. The Engine 1 crew and Assistant Chief Griebner found that the front door was completely blocked. Crews had to switch tactics and use the rear pre-connect 300' line and stretched to the rear door where we could make entry and advance to the second floor. At this fire, we encountered narrow width pathways within the house. Members had to work to stretch the line above the piles of material, which in some places were 4-5' above the floor.

During overhaul, again, many hands were needed to remove major amounts of materials from the fire-room.

As we observed at the fire at 64 Lafayette Blvd., often hoarders lose utility services. Specifically, at this fire, a large propane tank was in the basement and used to feed the furnace and stove. Due to hoarding piles reaching significant depths, extension cords were run from the basement to the 2nd floor through the clothes chute and strung across the stairwell. Many of these power cords were plugged into a common power-strip, an obvious fire-safety issue.



It is easy to see how fires can start in hoarder houses. Another fire with heavy content and hoarding conditions Snyder Firefighters encountered was at 181 Burroughs Drive came in on a cold February morning in 2006. The fire started in the kitchen and was likely started due to piles of paper and books stacked on the counters and stove near and open source of ignition. Again, windows were blocked with materials, and the front of the house was



obscured with overgrown vegetation. Entry to the house was limited to the rear, as the front door was also blocked.

In more recent times, Snyder has responded to a small grease fire on the stove at 45 Lexington Terrace in December 2018. For members who have responded to this call, and subsequent EMS calls at this address know, there have been threats made against us, Twin City Ambulance and the Police Department. This is unfortunately consistent with the mental illness associated with hoarding. The occupant is very

apprehensive of responders entering his home, for fear of being judged, or worse, being removed from his home.

Many compulsive hoarders fear that they will lose their possessions, and view their possessions at a higher value than reality. The loss or potential loss of possessions is such a highly stressful possibility for compulsive hoarders, that they often will resort to reclusive lives, secluding themselves from society, and keeping society out of their homes and property.

Hoarding impacts on Non-Fire Calls and EMS Calls

There are significant hazards with hoarding conditions to the occupants. Hoarders can often also suffer from chronic, debilitating medical issues. Due to the piles of material it is easy for filth to accumulate too, including garbage, excrement (animal, rodent and sometimes human), mildew and mold. Excessive amounts of ammonia in the air due to animal and human urine can lead to liver and kidney shut-down. Upper respiratory infections and cardiac complications are also prevalent. Due to a lack of proper cooking spaces, and the real distinct possibility of contaminated or expired food, residents will be expected to suffer from related health issues. Bug and rodent infestations can bring a host of other medical issues such as the spread of bacteria and disease. And as water utilities are shut-off, alternative methods, such as collecting rainwater or stealing of services can be expected. This can lead to obvious contamination issues leading to health issues.

In addition to these health hazards, large piles of debris and materials pose significant tripping and fall hazards. Occupants of these houses may suffer significant injury and not be able to seek help for days due to lack of mobility or access to a telephone. Additionally, void spaces are subject to collapse and entrap or engulf an occupant. Structural collapses are also real concerns as these structures are loaded with material far exceeding the rated capacity. As we work in these spaces we need to be aware of our surroundings, and any creaking or cracking of walls, floors and ceilings. These may be the initial indications of collapse. As always, with these incidents, we should call for more resources as needed; nothing we encounter cannot be solved, it may just take some outside the box thinking.

Patient care is going to be challenging in a hoarding home. First, locating the patient, and working to remove them from the house will be challenging based on the level of hoarding encountered. Likely, we will not be able to get the conventional stretcher in place and will likely need to use alternative methods to package and remove a patient such as the Patient Mover tarps, SKED, or the Stokes basket as some of the options.

As responders, we need to assess the scene and what hazards we will be exposed to. Our 'Scene Safety' is critical, from respiratory protection and protective clothing such as Tyvek suits may need to be used. On-Scene decontamination is a must, as we do not want to bring contaminated clothing or equipment back to the Firehouse, our personal vehicles, or apparatus.

Depending on the size and scale of the hoarding and conditions inside the residence, additional resources may need to be brought in, including Erie County Social Services, the County Health Department, the Town Fire Inspectors Office, and Town Building Department. With the possibility of animal hoarding, and potential animal abuse the SPCA or Town Animal Control officers would need to respond. This is in addition to our partners, the Amherst Police Department and Twin City Ambulance who respond with us regularly.

Heavy Content isn't just for Residential fires...

When thinking of hoarding fires, it is almost exclusive to residential structures. However, if we expand that thinking to commercial occupancies, we start to include 'Heavy Content' issues. Again, in the Heavy Content class at FDIC, Ryan Pennington posed the question, what if we were dispatched to a fire in the back-room of a retail store during the holiday shopping time of year? Would we likely see heavy content? I would say yes as stores increase their product volume. Is that hoarding? I don't think so. But there is a crossover in tactics. Again, use of Thermal Cameras, smooth-bore nozzles, extensive overhauls, and likely many extra hands with multiple alarms. One added tactic in a commercial space is to check the void spaces between the structure and the dropped ceiling.

Cleaning It All Up

Despite the many challenges and obstacles faced with hoarding fires, it is nothing that we cannot overcome. When you look at our normal firefighting operations, hoarding doesn't change the mission. Our mission is still to extinguish the fire and preserve life. Fires in HEavy Content/Hoarded houses will just require more hands at the scene, and as we've seen in the past, it is nothing we cannot handle.