

Multiple agencies work together to help compulsive hoarders

BY PAULA M. FELIPE/Public Safety Reporter

Article Launched: 10/09/2007 09:21:32 PM PDT

This is Part 2 of a two-part series on the Butte County Multidisciplinary Team Hoarding Task Force and the problem of compulsive hoarding.

The Butte County Multidisciplinary Team Hoarding Task Force wants compulsive hoarders to know they can seek help. They also want to destigmatize the way hoarders are perceived. Compulsive hoarders are not lazy or crazy. They have a diagnosable and treatable behavioral syndrome recognized as an obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), the task force says.

"We want to raise awareness that you are not a bad person if you are hoarding," said Nursing Supervisor Carla Velador from Butte County Public Health. "You are not a terrible person. You have a condition you can use help with." An assessment and referral are needed to see where the hoarder is and what type of treatment would work best, she added.

Compulsive hoarding does not stem from doing drugs, such as meth. While some meth users can lack the ability to concentrate and are neglectful of their living conditions, those with OCD are different from drug users.

"Drug users who neglect their living environments have debris and garbage in the house, but with OCD you'll find stacks of clutter all over the house and they continue to acquire more," Velador said.

People from all walks of life, including doctors, lawyers, and judges, can be compulsive hoarders.

These type of hoarders have trouble keeping their possessions in an organized fashion. It's a problem of emotional, mental, behavioral, and social well-being, according to the book "Buried in Treasures."

For many people, organization is a 'no-brainer'; linens belong in the linen closet, canned food belongs in the cupboards, tax returns belong in a file drawer, and so forth. For compulsive hoarders, these things get tossed together so it's difficult to find anything, Velador said.

Disorganization can fuel the hoarding problem. For example, if someone sets his paycheck on top of a pile of useless papers and then tosses some more papers on top of that paycheck, he would be very reluctant to throw away the pile without going through each piece of paper very carefully.

Difficulty making decisions and problems with categorization are features of compulsive hoarders.

Multiple agencies are collaborating on how to best help them. Butte County's departments of Public Health, Behavioral Health, Adult Protective Services, Environmental Health, law enforcement, code enforcement, fire service, recycle and waste facilities, among others, can play a role in helping to address the problem of compulsive hoarding. Velador is excited about the recycle and waste company in Paradise offering to come on board to help. Compulsive hoarders can also be helped from a program of skill-building and where they learn to think about possessions in a different way.

Oroville Police Department Code Enforcement Officer David Goyer, is also a member of the task force actively involved with helping hoarders. He provides courtesy notices and does follow-ups and makes referrals. Goyer enforces the City Municipal codes, including basic nuisance abatement, health and safety, and building and housing codes. He understands excessive clutter collected by someone with an obsessive compulsive disorder is a special situation that needs qualified assessment in order to see how they can be helped.

For example, a 92-year old woman had lived in the same apartment for more than 30 years and collected a huge amount of clutter and the apartment was being condemned. Goyer called in Velador, who assessed and screened for health issues and helped the woman get on Medi-Cal.

"We try to keep people independent," Velador said. In this case, the elderly woman's relatives and landlord also helped code enforcement in aiding the elderly woman, who did want help getting a physician and medical insurance. "All of our agencies work with the same people. This task force brings together help collectively to provide the assistance and resources they need to improve their quality of life," said Public Health's Alice Kienzle, chair of the Task Force. "And communicating with people is key," Velador added.

Another case finds a public health nurse going out with an animal control officer to handle a case of a woman hoarding cats. "We have a multi-task approach," Velador said. "If we help one person who is an animal hoarder, then we help not only the person and animals, but also neighbors, family, friends, and the entire community," Kienzle said. After an assessment, the hoarders can be referred for cognitive behavioral therapy and treatment program.

Compulsive hoarders have difficulty focusing and organizing items. Some are perfectionists who cannot want to make a mistake and put off making decisions, Velador said. "They keep procrastinating and become overwhelmed by the clutter and it continues to grow as they acquire more stuff through mail order, the Internet, and/or shopping at stores," she said. Depression can also overlap with hoarding as well as attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

The Task Force offers the following to help hoarders:

- Seek medical, physical, and emotional evaluations and treatment.
- Identify the possibilities of treatments and find a support group in your area.
- Seek the assistance of professionals; the problem won't go away.
- Learn from others' successes.
- Develop a plan to make your space more functional and safe and be patient; take small baby steps.
- Work in one area at a time. Sort items into three boxes; label the boxes with 'save', 'discard' and 'give away.'
- Reduce the acquisition of new items.
- Visit the Public Health Website for more resources at: <http://www.buttecounty.net/publichealth>

Need assistance finding help for compulsive hoarders?

A brochure created by the Butte County Multidisciplinary Team Hoarding Task Force provides the following available resources to assist compulsive hoarders:

- Adult Protective Services

24-hour hotline: 1-800-664-9774

- Treatment for Obsessive Compulsive Disorder:

530-538-7705

- Passages Adult Resource Center

530-898-5923

- Butte County Department of Behavioral Health

1-800-334-6622 or 530-538-7705

- Oroville City Code Enforcement

530-538-2435

- Paradise Connections

530-877-5845

- Celebrate Recovery-Support Group

530-533-1456

- Compulsive Hoarding Foundation

<http://www.ocfoundation.org>

- Clutterer's Anonymous

<http://cluttersanonymous.net>

- Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium: <http://www.tufts.edu/vet/cfa/hoarding/>

Other websites to help with clutter management and support include:

Fly Lady at: www.flylady.net

Children of Hoarders: www.childrenofhoarders.com

National Association of Professional Organizers: www.napo.net

National Study Group on Chronic Disorganization: www.nsgcd.or

"We hope you spend less time acquiring, looking for lost items, or coping with clutter. We hope, too, you have more opportunities and time to develop other activities and interests. If most of your time has been consumed by our things, you may have to make an effort to develop new activities. There is no shortage of fun and interesting things to do. We wish you well on our journey beyond hoarding." --Buried in Treasures by David F. Tolin, Randy O. Frost, and Gail Steketee.