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HOARDING: LEARN THE RISKS AND HOW PROPERTY OWNERS CAN RECOVER

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Introduction

Hoarding is more than clutter. It is a serious psychological condition that causes people to accumulate excessive numbers of items that often have little to no value. This collection of items typically results in unsanitary, unsafe, living conditions and an increased risk of structural damage, fires, injuries, and sickness.

Left unchecked, hoarding behavior can wreak havoc on owners of multifamily housing units and other rental properties. Given the risks to health and safety, hoarding is not a problem that untrained property owners can handle on their own. A professional restoration services provider can not only clean up but also remediate risks and repair essential structures, returning the building to its pre-loss state.

In this whitepaper, we will take a closer look at the risks of hoarding and how a restoration services provider can lead cleanup efforts after a hoarder.



What Is Hoarding?

Hoarding is a complex mental health disorder characterized by the excessive accumulation of possessions, regardless of their value or usefulness, and the inability or unwillingness to discard them. Estimates suggest that serious hoarding problems are present in at least one out of every 50 people; some believe they may be as common as one in every 20 people.

People with hoarding disorder often have difficulty deciding which items to keep and which to discard, resulting in an accumulation of clutter. The severity of their hoarding falls into five levels, according to the Institute for Challenging Disorganization.

Level 1: Clutter is not excessive and does not interfere with normal living spaces or activities. The home may be untidy or disorganized, but the clutter does not pose any significant risk of fire, pests, or other hazards.

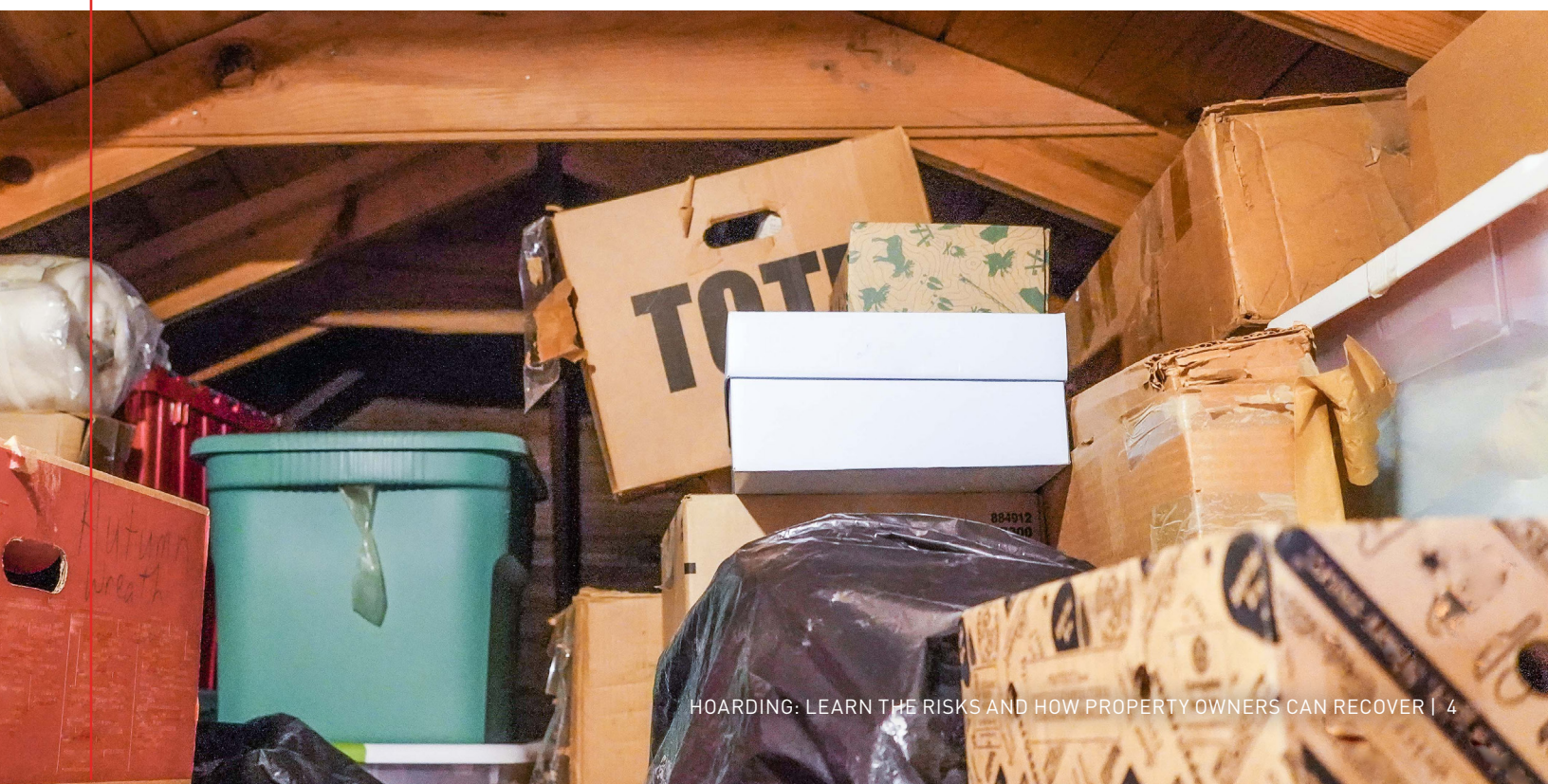
Level 2: Clutter is starting to accumulate and may interfere with some normal living spaces or activities. The home may have some areas that are cluttered or filled with excess possessions, but the clutter does not pose any immediate risk to health and safety.

Level 3: Clutter is significant and is starting to cause problems with living spaces and activities. The home may be filled with clutter that is starting to interfere with normal activities, such as cooking, cleaning, and personal hygiene. Some health and safety risks may be associated with the clutter.

Level 4: Clutter is severe and is causing significant problems with living spaces and activities. The home may be filled with clutter that blocks access to living spaces and causes significant health and safety risks, including the risk of fire, pests, or other hazards.

Level 5: Clutter is extreme and poses a significant risk to health and safety. The home may be filled with clutter that makes the living space inaccessible. There may be a risk of fire, pests, or other hazards associated with the clutter. The clutter may be so severe that it poses a risk of structural damage.

Regardless of its severity, property owners should recognize that hoarding can cause significant problems, including health and safety hazards that must be remediated quickly to avoid illness and injury.



The Hazards of Hoarding

Hoarding poses risks to the hoarder and others who live in or near the property and those who come into contact with the hoarding environment.

HERE ARE SOME OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT RISKS:

Fire: Most clutter, including newspapers, magazines, and other paper products, is extremely flammable. Sometimes clutter can cover a heat vent or damaged wires. Accumulated clutter can also make it difficult for emergency responders to access a property in the event of a fire.

Pests: Hoarding attracts pests, including insects, rodents, and other vermin, that can spread disease and damage a building's infrastructure.

Structural damage: The weight of hoarded items can cause structural damage, compromising the integrity of walls, ceilings, and floors, creating safety hazards. Clutter can also reduce the ability to perform routine maintenance on critical systems, including HVAC equipment and fire suppression systems like sprinklers and alarms.

Health hazards: The unsanitary conditions that result from hoarding, such as piles of trash and debris, can attract bacteria and germs that cause illness. Mold and mildew can also grow in moist or damp areas, leading to respiratory problems, especially for people with allergies.

Air quality: With clutter comes dust, odors, and ammonia from decaying waste products, which can make it difficult to breathe and can cause respiratory problems for people and pets.

Tripping and falling hazards: The accumulation of clutter can make it difficult to navigate through the home, which can be especially dangerous for older adults and those with mobility issues. People can also become trapped under debris.

Financial burdens: The costs of hoarding can be significant, including expenses related to storage, clutter removal, and repairs.



Steps Involved in Hoarding Cleanup

Remediating a hoarding situation is not as simple as throwing away clutter. It requires a strategy and resources and is best left to experienced restoration professionals.

Here is what needs to happen in the typical hoarding restoration effort.

ASSESSING THE PROPERTY

The first step in the cleanup process is to thoroughly assess the property and develop a plan of action. A restoration services provider will evaluate the extent of the damage and determine the best approach to clean up and restore the property. This assessment may involve identifying any structural damage and hazards, such as mold growth, biohazards, and pest infestations, and developing a plan to address them, including which equipment and supplies are needed.

The service provider will also develop a rough order of magnitude (ROM) estimate for the work at this stage. Keep in mind that this estimate could shift as additional problems are uncovered during the decluttering process.

REMOVING, RECOVERING, AND DISPOSING OF CLUTTER

The next step is to begin decluttering the property. Restoration service companies can safely and efficiently remove clutter. They can also sort through clutter to identify items of value that may be salvaged.

Providers with expertise in [content recovery](#) can assist with this process by removing and disposing of the clutter safely and efficiently. No items should be discarded without the client's express permission. They can also sort through the clutter to identify any items of value that can be salvaged or donated, including furniture, art, office supplies, personal belongings, most appliances, commercial items, documents, and more.

Here are some examples of how an experienced restoration services provider with specialized know-how and equipment can help with contents recovery:

Document restoration: Piles of documents may be damaged by mold, water, grime, or vermin. Freeze-drying, air-drying, desiccant dehumidifying, and hand-dry cleaning techniques can restore important photographs, business records, and letters.

Electronics/machinery: Restoration specialists use sophisticated tools that can recover machinery, computer hardware, and digital files.

Fabrics: In a hoarding environment, aging fabric faces the risks of oxidation, residual odors, and stains. Providers typically take these materials offsite for specialty cleaning.

Hard contents: To salvage hard contents, ranging from ceiling fans and dishes to musical instruments, restoration specialists may use an ultrasonic cleaning system, where chemicals and water penetrate every crevice, lifting away soot, dirt, grease, residues, and more.

Heirlooms, art, and antiques: Conservators assess the condition and make recovery recommendations, using photos of the original if available, with the goal of restoring the piece to its original state.

CLEANING EFFORTS
CAN SAVE UP TO **80%** OF
THE COST OF REPLACING ITEMS.

CLEANING AND DISINFECTING THE PROPERTY

Once the clutter has been removed, the restoration services provider will begin the process of cleaning and disinfecting the property. This is an elaborate process that involves a variety of services, depending on the situation.

Mold Removal

Mold spores are virtually everywhere, and they spread rapidly with exposure to moisture: they can spread up to one square inch per day. In a hoarding situation, mold may be spreading through walls, crevices, floors, and more, causing structural damage and health problems.

An experienced [mold remediation](#) provider will analyze the property's air quality, inspect and remove any mold-infected items and surfaces, and identify the type of mold by assessing reports from an industrial hygienist. To prevent cross-contamination, the provider should use dehumidifiers, HEPA filters, disinfectants, and antimicrobial solutions.

For a large area, you may want to consider a provider with access to state-of-the-art disinfection technology for surface decontamination. Green technology, such as ultraviolet germicidal irradiation, kills or inactivates mold spores, viruses, bacteria, and fungi.

Biohazard Cleanup

If hazardous materials, such as chemicals, animal waste, or bodily fluids, are present, the restoration services provider will conduct a thorough [biohazard cleanup](#). This may involve the use of specialized equipment, such as protective gear and air scrubbers, to safely remove and dispose of these materials.

The right provider for the work will have technicians certified in disposal processes and advanced equipment to handle dangerous substances. Look for a provider that uses vaporized hydrogen peroxide for cleaning, ultraviolet light for noninvasive disinfection, and disinfecting agents registered with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The provider's staff should be trained in biorecovery standards, trauma scene waste management, bloodborne pathogens, and hazardous materials.



HVAC System Cleaning and Restoration

Dirt, grime, and mold build up in [air systems and ducts](#) and can affect people with allergies, immune deficiencies, and other health sensitivities. A professional commercial contractor can clean all components of the system, including motor and fan housing, supply-and-return air ducts, diffusers and grills, drain or drip pans, heat exchangers, and cooling and heating coils.

Commercial air duct cleaning services remove mold, particles, dust, and buildup. Specialized tools can help technicians locate and dislodge debris and buildup in air ducts, then remove them from the system with a high-powered vacuum. To ensure the best-quality work, look for technicians certified by the National Air Duct Cleaners Association (NADCA) before engaging a provider.

Odor Removal

Hoarding behavior can result in the accumulation of unpleasant odors that can be difficult to eliminate. Restoration services providers have the necessary equipment and supplies—such as air scrubbers, ozone generators, dry chemical sponges, and degreasers—to effectively eliminate these odors, leaving the property smelling fresh and clean.

RESTORING THE PROPERTY TO A SAFE AND HABITABLE CONDITION

A restoration service provider's goal is to restore the property to its original, safe, and habitable condition. Depending on the extent of the damage, it may require replacing damaged appliances or fixtures. It might also require more extensive work, such as [demolition](#) or [reconstruction](#).

A provider will work with you to assess potential structural issues, determine how to limit further damage, and create a strategy to restore your property to pre-loss condition. Possible repairs include the replacement and restoration of columns, beams, floors, ceilings, walls, and more. Experienced providers will be able to salvage as much of the property as possible.



The Benefits of Hiring a Restoration Services Provider to Handle a Hoarding Situation

Removing clutter and restoring a property can be a daunting process—not to mention potentially hazardous to your health and safety. A professional restoration services provider can handle this laborious and dangerous work on your behalf, saving you time, energy, and resources and ensuring you stay safe and healthy.

Here are three key benefits of engaging an experienced restoration services company:

Efficiency: Restoration services providers know how to clean up hoarding situations effectively and have the advanced tools and supplies to safely remove and dispose of clutter and hazardous materials. Larger providers offer a range of cleanup services, ranging from debris removal and cleanup to structural repairs, demolition, and restoration, so every aspect of the cleanup process is addressed.

Safety: If a hoarding situation results in hazardous materials, such as mold and animal waste, that have been left unaddressed, the risks can be extensive. Restoration service providers can use state-of-the-art technology and techniques to mitigate these risks. Addressing these risks also reduces the chance that a property owner can be liable for further damage and injuries.

Compliance: Hoarding behavior can violate local health and safety regulations, especially in multifamily housing facilities where clutter can pose a fire hazard. An experienced restoration service provider can ensure the cleanup process satisfies applicable laws and regulations.





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