

Stuff in the City: University Government Partnership to Build Hoarding Intervention Capacity

C. Bratiotis, Ph.D., MSW and J. Baker, MA, MSW
In supportive partnership with Larry Burks, MPA, CED

Introduction

Government and community agencies are being called upon with increasing frequency to mitigate the risks associated with hoarding. The City of Bellevue, together with researchers from the University of Nebraska at Omaha, sought to collaboratively formulate a response plan that addresses the physical, emotional and psychosocial aspects of hoarding, thereby reducing the risk to individuals, families, and the community.

Defining the Problem

Hoarding was identified as a stand-alone mental health disorder in 2013 by the American Psychiatric Association. Frost and Hartl (1996) first defined it as:

- The acquisition of, and failure to discard, a large number of possessions that appear to be useless or of limited value
- Living spaces are sufficiently cluttered so as to preclude activities for which those spaces were designed
- Significant distress or impairment in functioning caused by the hoarding

Hoarding was easy to define for City officials. The language used was vivid and unmistakably about the stuff: “paths through the house”, “keeping everything you ever had”, “not being able to take a step without stepping on something”. Likewise, community agency representatives had a clear idea of what hoarding was, although their language described the personal impact of hoarding rather than focusing on volume: “unsafe”, “unsanitary”, “risk of eviction or injury”.

Frequently, hoarding is erroneously equated to squalor or filth. City officials referenced squalor in conjunction with hoarding more frequently than community agency representatives. One City official even remarked that the “approach to a dirty home was essentially the same as for a hoarded home from the City’s perspective”. This lack of clarity often leads to ineffective and costly interventions, such as clean outs, that only address the home environment rather than the underlying mental illness.

Risks Associated with Hoarding

Increased fire hazards

Trips/Slips/Falls

Safety concerns for vulnerable children, adults, and animals

Structural damage to building

Homelessness

Methodology: Focus Groups

- Two 60 minute, semi-structured focus groups were conducted: one with City officials and one with community agency representatives.
- Five City departments participated in the City official focus group, including Administration, Code Enforcement, Police, Permits and Inspections, and Human Services.
- Eleven community agencies sent representatives to the community focus group, including individuals with expertise in property management, public housing, developmental disabilities, geriatric services, mental health services, public health, case management and animal welfare.
- Audio-recordings were made of each focus group with consent from the participants, the results of which were transcribed into written documents and analyzed using qualitative research methods.

Methodology: Community Education

- A 20-week, facilitator-led workshop based on *Buried in Treasures* by D. Tolin, G. Steketee, and R. Frost, was offered free of cost to individuals who self-identified as having a problem with hoarding.
- Preference was given to residents of Bellevue and Sarpy County.
- More than 45 participants were screened via telephone interview; 12 were selected for an in-person interview, and 10 participants were selected to complete the workshop.
- Participants completed hoarding self-assessments on weeks 1 and 20 of the workshop, rated motivation at the start and end of every session using a 1-10 Likert Scale, and submitted weekly homework reports.

Results: Focus Groups

- Thirteen themes emerged during focus group discussions, including Definitions, Resulting Problem, Collaboration, Animal Hoarding, Safety, Problem Identification, Legal, Interventions, Family/Friends, Needs, Stigma, Time and Cost.
- Most discussion centered on the themes of Collaboration, Legal, and Needs.

Collaboration

Both focus groups agreed that collaboration was essential when addressing hoarding cases. Maximum effectiveness in responding to a hoarding case requires involvement from both enforcement-type agencies (i.e. police and code enforcement) and support agencies (mental health providers and case management).

Most participants agreed that collaboration between agencies increased access to resources and made long-term follow-up more feasible, both of which are necessary to “interrupt the vicious cycle” of accumulation, isolation, and crisis.

The community focus group members reported having access to a wider network of agencies and resources than city officials. However, community agencies encountered issues in gaining initial access, a difficulty that City officials did not have due to police involvement. Both focus groups indicated problems with long-term access and follow-up.

The community focus group expressed frustration over the lack of fluidity in services. Services do not always cross city or county lines, leading to difficulty for Bellevue or Sarpy County residents who need services only provided in Omaha or Douglas County. However, concerns over service duplication restrict development of local services in Bellevue or Sarpy County.

Both focus groups observed that collaboration with family members is ideal but is seldom reliable due to the long-term, psychosocial impact of mental illness on individuals and their families.

Legal

Both focus groups agreed that police are the preferred first responders to a hoarding case in order to ensure safety. The City official focus group noted that while this is ideal, it can be a drain on the resources and manpower of the police department.

“In the 17 years I’ve been here, we’ve never had to get a warrant.”

The City official focus group identified a number of indicators of hoarding, all of which are cause for a warrant to gain access to the property. However, the city of Bellevue is remarkable for never having to have obtained a warrant to gain initial entry into a hoarded home.

Although fines are occasionally utilized, it was observed that they rarely decrease or eliminate hoarding behavior and may compound the problem by overwhelming the already struggling citizen.

Some participants advocated for mandatory mental health counseling be required through the court system, such as mental health diversion.

“For those that want help, we need to open that door for them. Right now, we crack it open for a few days and then we shut it again.”

Needs

Both focus groups identified a need for a crisis team when dealing with hoarding cases. The City official focus group stated they frequently work with an agency that provides this service. The community focus group lacked clarity on how to access crisis services.

Both groups identified a need for mental health professionals with hoarding-specific training. In addition, the City official focus group identified a need for peer support.

Both focus groups expressed a need for a cohesive, ongoing, hoarding-specific response, but especially the community focus group. Many participants spoke to the futility of investing in short-term fixes, such as clean outs or merely providing a Dumpster.

Financial and labor resources were also identified as needs.

“I don’t think you can solve any crisis situation with \$300.”

Community Education Results

“Thank you, thank you, thank you for telling me this is a mental illness!”

“I’ve never met anyone else who hoarded. I finally feel like others understand...there are more people like me.”

All 10 *Buried in Treasures* participants completed the workshop. Nine participants continue to work on their hoarding problem through regular participation in a peer-facilitated group that meets twice a month and follows the format established in *Buried in Treasures*.

Participants’ motivation to address their hoarding problem increased on average 10 – 20% after each group session.

Participants reported spending an average of 11 hours a week and a combined 1,032 hours over the course of the workshop working on sorting, discarding, organizing, or doing homework.

Recommendations

The City of Bellevue as a whole, and more specifically the Bellevue Police Department, should be recognized for their remarkable response to the problem of hoarding. City officials from every department were engaged and empathetic. Police officers, especially, invest their time to build rapport and provide follow up to those struggling with hoarding. The City Permits and Inspections Department should also be commended on its ability to establish rapport and to work with individuals who have become isolated and ashamed in their mental illness. In order to build on the excellent framework established by the City of Bellevue, the following recommendations are offered:

- Provide first responders with an assessment tool to determine the severity of the hoarding, such as the HOMES Multi-disciplinary Hoarding Risk Assessment or the Clutter Image Rating Scale.
- Collaborate with agencies such as the Sarpy Cass Health Department to develop an educational handout on hoarding and squalor, and distribute the handout, along with resources, to every case of hoarding and squalor that is encountered.
- Refer every case of hoarding and/or squalor for crisis intervention and/or case management services.
- Allocate resources for a peer support position, which should be filled by trained peer support specialist that has training in hoarding, as well as other mental health issues.

***“[We need] a ‘no wrong door’ policy...
a gateway to resources no matter
how you enter the system.”***

This research was funded by the University of Nebraska Omaha, College of Public Affairs and Community Service Urban Research Grant.

The authors gratefully acknowledge NAMI Omaha for providing books and refreshments, and Nebraska Medicine Bellevue for providing space for the *Buried in Treasures* workshop.