



## Buried alive: hoarders can't help themselves

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**Hoarders forced to clean up their homes and throw out their possessions will suffer trauma and begin collecting again at an even faster rate, according to the City of Vancouver, which is struggling to deal with the issue.**

From rats and bedbugs to improperly stored accelerants, hoarding is causing serious health and safety concerns in Metro Vancouver.

Landlord Andrew Sutherland learned the hard way about how much damage a hoarder can do, after a tenant turned his tidy Vancouver apartment into a chaotic mess of garbage, discarded goods and human waste in less than two months.

He is now in the process of evicting the tenant. A hearing is scheduled with the Residential Tenancy Branch in hopes of having the tenant made financially responsible for the thousands of dollars in cleanup and damage costs.

In addition to the health risks to himself and others in the West End apartment building, the hoarder living in Sutherland's suite left lit cigarettes on his wooden mantle to burn themselves out – a major fire hazard.

"That's just a recipe for disaster," said 1-800-GOT-JUNK franchise owner Darryl Arnold, who helped clean the apartment and often deals with junk removal at hoarder houses.

"It's amazing that the building didn't burn down. And even if that individual managed to get out, the whole building could have been at risk."

Some hoarding situations end with tragic outcomes.

On Oct. 9, 2011, a hoarder was killed after being trapped in his own home on West 23rd Avenue because the door was too blocked by debris for firefighters to enter.

Crews eventually had to chainsaw the door right off to get inside. What they found was a "mountain" of possessions stretching four or five feet high.

"When they climbed up and over that, they actually tried to fight the fire pulling hose lines, they only made it a few feet before they realized it was just far too dangerous," said Vancouver Deputy Fire Chief Les Szikai.

The one-storey home contained so much junk that fire officials were unable to even determine how the fire started.

Several months earlier, in May, the Port Coquitlam home of a hoarder was totally destroyed. The man who lived there was safe, however, because he wasn't in the home at the time. He had been sleeping outside in a tent in the backyard for several months because his house finally became too full to go inside.

At the root of hoarding is a complete lack of ability to throw away belongings, even if those possessions are unsanitary, or put the person in danger.

Clinical psychologist Dr. Joti Samra says many hoarders also suffer from anxiety disorders and obsessive-compulsive disorder, and the uncontrollable urge to control and keep things can be devastating to the individual.

"It's a behaviour where individual collect things and have an obsessive need to collect despite the negative impact on their financial situation, their health, their own living environment and often their social and occupational function," she said.

Samra said many hoarders come from backgrounds where there is an unusually high occurrence of childhood trauma, abuse and neglect. Individuals are often depressed, she said, and hoarders often get a "rush" from buying products or collecting items.

"It makes them feel good, but then it starts getting really out of control," she said.

"Collecting things often decreases anxiety. And that's hard for a lot of people to understand because often these living situations are homes that none of us would want to step in. Some of them you can't even walk. It's a mental illness."

City of Vancouver officials say hoarding is a growing problem. A roundtable of fire, health and building experts was formed in 2010 to tackle the issue on all sides. It's the first task force of its kind in North America.

"There are three issues. One is to help the hoarder, to prevent harm to the hoarder or to the property, or to other people that are living in the building. And so you want to reduce those risks -- that is the reason for the city to be involved in that," said chief building official Will Johnson.

Currently there are no bylaws that directly address hoarding, but fire and city officials are allowed to order hoarded material removed from a home if there is a danger to safety.

But Samra said hoarders will often build up their collections over a period of many years, and removing those objects can cause a traumatic shock to the system. In many cases, it will make the hoarder even worse.

"If you take away the objects but haven't helped the individual and given them alternate coping mechanisms, you're not helping the person," Samra said.

"They're not psychologically equipped to manage that anxiety."

Samra says there are few professionals trained to deal with hoarders in Vancouver, and North America in general. She said hoarders tend to hide their problems from their loved ones, and are only brought into the spotlight if they have problems with the city, or complaints from neighbours or loved ones.

If you think a neighbour or a family member is dealing with a hoarding problem call 311. The city will record the case for future records, and the appropriate support staff can be alerted and dispatched to help.

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