Animal Hoarding
LESSONS FROM A NYC SOCIAL WORKER

Animal Hoarding: Basics

- Definition
- Profile/Demographics
- Prevalence
- Research Initiatives
Definition: 4 Characteristics*:

- Failure to provide a minimum standard of nutrition, sanitation, and veterinary care;
- Inability to recognize the effects of this failure on the welfare of animals, the human members of the household, or the environment;
- Obsessive attempts to accumulate or maintain an animal collection despite deteriorating conditions;
- Denial or minimization of problems & living conditions.

* Defined by the Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium

Profile/Demographics

Animal hoarders are most likely ** to be:

- Female
- Age 60 or older
- Single, residing alone, and isolated from family & friends
- On a fixed income
- Experienced a recent crisis (loss of job, death in family, etc)

** Hoarders are discovered in all demographic groups

Prevalence

- More than 5,000 cases are identified each year nationally
- The actual number of cases is unknown
- No single agency tracks animal hoarding cases
- Neighbors/friends/relatives refuse to make animal cruelty charges fearing getting the person in trouble or concern for the animals (that they will be euthanized)
- Politics of animal hoarding cases
Animal Hoarding Research

- First reported in medical literature in 1982 – a case report of 36 incidents in New York
- Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium
  www.tufts.edu/vet/cfa/hoarding/index.html

Consequences

- Human Consequences
- Animal Welfare Consequences
- Environmental/Community Consequences
Human Welfare

- Undiagnosed or untreated mental health impairments
- Self-neglect: poor nutrition, healthcare, grooming
- Potential elder abuse by caretakers
- Unsafe environments leading to fire and safety hazards
- Severe stench and exposure to high ammonia
- Potential for animal bites and infections

Animal Welfare

- Multiple Animals that are poorly socialized or exercised
- Inbreeding
- Dead and/or dying animals
- Signs of disease (ringworm, Upper Respiratory, etc)
- Overcrowded and dirty cages
- Urine burns
- Skinny/malnourished animals
Environmental

- Multiple animals
- Fire hazards with deplorable conditions
- Severe odor — feces, urine
- Infestation
- Additional Clutter
- Non-working utilities

Consequences of Hoarding

- Risk to public health for hoarders and neighbors
- Declining property values in communities
- Declining quality of life (for people, neighbors, and animals)
- Over-population of ill, unaltered, and poorly socialized animals
- Potential for eviction or hospitalization for hoarders
- Costly to municipalities
Responses to Hoarding

- No Response
- Removal of animals only
- Task Force/Collaboration

****There is near 100% recidivism in animal hoarding

NYC Hoarding Project Goals

- Begin to understand the complex issues of hoarding
- Respond to cases referred by Humane Law, Animal Control, Department of Health, Adult Protection Services, and animal rescue groups
- Develop appropriate interventions for the Dept. of Health
- Implement responses that reduce the number of animals that require euthanasia
- Establish inter-agency collaboration
Commonalities From 80 Cases

- Nearly all hoarders showed signs of mental health impairments (and only 9% revealed a history of mental health treatment)
- More than 50% of hoarders were either threatened with eviction or had been given eviction/foreclosure notice
- 47% of cases had dead or very ill animals
- 14% of cases had signs of elder abuse
- 14% of cases were connected to support services

Commonalities

- Older people with no supports and great vulnerability
- Undiagnosed and untreated mental health issues and medical needs
- Housing at serious risk – either due to eviction or safety concerns
- Large numbers of sick and dying animals
- Lack of services or even service coordination that recognized the issues of animal hoarding

NYC Project Interventions

- 45% of cases – participated in a pilot hoarding intervention that included animal care, counseling, linkages to services, and monitoring
- 23% agreed to voluntary removal of animals
- 11% required crisis responses
- 21% refused voluntary interventions and were not yet classified as crises to require a response but were referred back to Humane Law Enforcement
Collaborating Agencies
- ASPCA
- NYC Animal Control
- Police & Fire Depts
- Adult Protective Services
- Guardianship Programs
- Hospitals
- Department of Health

Pilot Hoarding Project
- **Assessment**: of the person, animals, and environment
- **Education & Counseling**: animal welfare, hoarding behavior, mental health, eviction, crisis intervention
- **Animal Welfare**: spay/neuter, vaccinations, wellness exams, reduction of animals through adoption
- **Linkages to Services**: mental health & medical care, cleaning, aging services, benefits, legal services, case management, community programs, neighbors
- **Monitoring**: follow up visits
Results of Pilot Effort

- Follow up visits were conducted to nearly all homes that participated in pilot intervention.
- Nearly all homes had improved conditions from initial visit and appeared capable of caring for remaining animals.
- Only 3 cases had MORE animals than at the time of intervention.
- Hoarders who had participated in the pilot were no longer at risk of eviction or removal from property.

Recommendations to NYC

- Recognize animal hoarding as a public health issue and unlawful behavior — requiring a combination of legislation, education, and interventions addressing human welfare and animal welfare.
- Establish a multi-agency work group to receive complaints & respond to cases.
- Educate first responders.
- Respond to cases with compassion but also with clear consequences addressing mental health and human needs.
- Establish a preventive response as an alternative to prosecution.
Social Work & Hoarders

- Understanding the Animal Hoarder
- Mental Health Issues
- Excuses for Hoarding
- Additional Factors
- Different Types of Animal Hoarders
- What social workers can do in animal hoarding cases

Mental Health

- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Hoarding of Items
- Personality Disorders
  - Anxious-Depressive Disorders
    - Anxiety
    - Mood Disorders (Depressed)
    - Schizophrenia
  - Autism
  - Cognitive Disorders (Alzheimer’s, Dementia)
  - Delusional Thoughts
  - Paranoia
  - Poor Impulse Control
  - Social Phobia
  - Post Traumatic Stress

Excuses for Hoarding

- Attachment Issues: “The animals are my children (or family)”, “I don’t want to break up the family”
- The Rescue Syndrome: “This is better than being killed”, “I am giving them a chance to live”
- The Savior: “Everyone wants to harm them but if it wasn’t for me -- they’d be dead”, “I brought the animals back to life”
- The Hoarder in Denial: “I don’t use that room anyway”
- Inflated Ego: “I’m a breeder”, “I am a rescuer”
Additional Beliefs

- Most animal hoarders believe THEY know what is best for their animals and THEY are the experts — as opposed to vets and humane organizations.
- They do not see their animals suffering.
- Most believe their behavior is not related to mental health.
- Most believe they do not need help.

Additional Factors

- Physical Health Issues
- Eviction/Foreclosure
- Elder Abuse
- Fraud
- Stress
- Shame

Types of Hoarders *

- The Overwhelmed Caregiver
- The Rescue Hoarder
- The Exploiter Hoarder
- The Specific Breed (or color) Hoarder
- The Hospice Hoarder

* These categories are not definitive and hoarders often show characteristics across different types.
Overwhelmed Caregivers

- Appears overwhelmed; somewhat aware of problem
- Isolated; believes the animals are like family
- Hoarding is primarily through reproduction
- Mood disorders are present (depression, etc.)
- They have poor problem solving skills
- They are more open to assistance than other types

Rescue Hoarders

- Mission driven - they must save animals from euthanasia
- The hoarder can't/won't say no – they believe the animals are better off with them than anyone else
- The increasing number of animals gradually overwhelms the person
- They are often connected in the animal rescue world
- They avoid authorities as much as possible
Exploiter Hoarders

- Acquire animals to serve themselves
- They deny the hoarding and quickly blame others
- They believe they are smarter than everyone regarding the animals
- They acquire animals actively — usually by picking up strays
- They are articulate & crafty — they have explanations. They lie and demonstrate predatory behavior to get what they want
- They exhibit sociopathic characteristics & have personality disorders

Breeder Hoarders

- They are focused on a specific breed of an animal or color of an animal
- Often closely connected to breed rescue groups
Hospice Hoarders

- Take in animals already exhibiting long-term illness (FIV, Leukemia, etc)
- They market themselves as sanctuaries but don't have the ability to sufficiently care for the animals
- They dismiss concerns for the animals because they were sick before they were taken in
- Closely aligned to rescue hoarders in that they never say no to bringing in a new animal

A Role for Social Workers

- Assessment and Engagement
- Motivational Interviewing
- Determining Intervention (emergency removal, preventive, legal)
- Collaboration with Multi-Agencies (Legal, Animal Welfare, Adult Protective Services (APS), Health, Mental Health, Animal Welfare, Housing, Police and Fire Department)
- Linkage to Services (mental health, health, cleaning, home care, guardianship, APS, Meals on Wheels, animal welfare services, etc)
- Following up and Monitoring