



Bay District Volunteer Fire Department, Inc.

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Lexington Park Station (Co. 3)

California Station (Co. 9)

When Clutter Becomes a Life Safety Emergency: Understanding Hoarding, Fire Risk, and Getting Help

Several recent fires in St. Mary's County have involved severe hoarding conditions, including incidents in Leonardtown, Mechanicsville, and Scotland, as well as a fatal fire earlier this year. In those cases, cluttered interiors slowed access, delayed firefighting operations, and created more dangerous conditions for both residents and first responders.

Hoarding is not simply a housekeeping issue. It is a recognized mental health condition that involves persistent difficulty discarding possessions, even when the accumulation makes a home unsafe or no longer fully usable. Experts estimate that hoarding disorder affects approximately 2–3% of the population, with higher rates among older adults. The condition often becomes more severe over time without support or treatment.

This becomes especially dangerous when fire is involved. Excess belongings can block doors, hallways, and windows, limiting escape routes and trapping occupants inside. Heavy clutter increases the amount of fuel available to a fire, allowing it to grow faster and burn hotter. It can also hide fire extension within walls or beneath piles of materials, making it more difficult for firefighters to locate and extinguish the fire.

For firefighters, hoarding conditions significantly change how emergencies are handled. Search operations become slower and more hazardous as crews must navigate narrow pathways, unstable piles, and blocked rooms. These conditions can delay locating victims who may be trapped inside. Clutter can conceal structural hazards such as weakened floors, increasing the risk of injury to responders. Fires in hoarded homes often require more personnel, more equipment, and more time to safely bring under control.

National data highlights the seriousness of this issue. While hoarding-related fires represent a relatively small percentage of total residential fires, they account for a disproportionately high number of fire-related deaths. In one study, hoarding fires were linked to nearly a quarter of preventable residential fire fatalities. Additional national data shows thousands of clutter-related fires over recent years, resulting in over a thousand injuries to both civilians and firefighters, as well as hundreds of millions of dollars in property loss.

Hoarding conditions also impact emergency medical services. Even without a fire, EMS crews may face significant challenges when responding to homes with excessive clutter.

Narrow or blocked access points can delay reaching a patient, and confined spaces can make it difficult to provide care or safely remove someone from the home. These delays can be critical during medical emergencies such as cardiac arrest, breathing problems, or serious falls.

It is important to approach this issue with compassion. Hoarding disorder is a behavioral health condition - not a personal failure. Many individuals feel overwhelmed, embarrassed, or unsure where to begin, which can prevent them from seeking help.

Family members and loved ones also play an important role. In many cases, it can be difficult for someone experiencing hoarding conditions to reach out for help on their own. If you are concerned about a family member, friend, or neighbor, offering support and gently encouraging them to seek assistance can make a meaningful difference. Families can also reach out to local behavioral health providers, community services, or healthcare professionals for guidance on how to help a loved one in a respectful and supportive way.

Effective treatments are available, including therapy that helps individuals develop safer habits, reduce clutter, and improve decision-making. Residents in St. Mary's County who may be struggling, or who are concerned about a loved one, are encouraged to seek help through local behavioral health services, healthcare providers, or community support programs. Resources are available to assist individuals in creating safer living environments while addressing the underlying causes of hoarding.

Fire and EMS personnel are committed to protecting the community, but safety starts at home. Reducing clutter, keeping exits clear, and seeking help early can make a life-saving difference.

Fire Prevention Tip: Keep all exits - doors and windows - clear and accessible at all times. In an emergency, having a clear path out can save your life.

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