

New Task Force Takes On Hoarding

by [Beth Milligan](#)

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A Garfield Township man who lost his life in a house fire last October after piles of possessions blocked his escape has brought "hoarding" to the forefront locally. The compulsive accumulation of items affects an estimated three to five percent of local residents. Now, a task force representing local health, emergency and human service agencies -- with help from a reality TV expert -- is working to address the disorder and offer "compassion and help" for those suffering from it.

The task force, chaired by Fire and Life Safety Public Educator Meredith Hawes of Grand Traverse Metro Emergency Services Authority, met Friday to begin discussion on how to create a "unified language" and response system for hoarding. Members of the Grand Traverse County Health Department, Disability Network Northern Michigan, Commission on Aging, Animal Control, Northern Lakes Community Mental Health and several other organizations shared struggles and strategies for assisting clients with hoarding disorders at the meeting.

Hawes distributed a proposed "Clutter Image Rating" system to attendees, which utilizes images to demonstrate hoarding severity levels on a scale of 1-9 within various house rooms. "We want a common language to say, 'This situation is a six,' so we're prepared for that encounter in the home," she says.

Helping emergency responders navigate scenes where hoarding is present – as well as compiling a shared database of such properties – is a key goal for the task force. Hawes tells *The Ticker* fire scenes "are particularly dangerous" for responders, noting that "there's often so many items in the home it's disorienting...nothing (about the layout) makes sense. The additional items also increase the fuel load, making fires burn hotter and faster."

Responders can also experience difficulties getting medical equipment in and out of a home, or accessing a resident when pathways are blocked. "It slows our response time," says Hawes – time that could mean the difference between life and death in a medical emergency.

At present, local agencies respond to hoarding situations only as they encounter them – on a Child Protective Services visit or in response to an Animal Control complaint, for example. The task force hopes to consolidate such interactions to one touch point with a single entity, a recommendation made by Orange County Fire Authority Inspector Darren Johnson, a featured expert on A&E's reality show [Hoarders](#).

"(Johnson) advised us to streamline communication among agencies so clients weren't being bombarded by four or five different people approaching them, which will make them feel overwhelmed," says Hawes. "Instead, it would just be one."

The task force also took to heart Johnson's other advice to "have a paradigm shift from forcing people to make changes through code violations or fines to instead offering compassion and helping them find a desire to change," summarizes Hawes. "We're talking about human beings...who have a disorder they often feel very shameful about. Hopefully having a group like this will let us identify cases where this is recurring...and be a resource for those who need it."

Metro Fire Chief Pat Parker, who advocated Friday for researching privacy laws and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPPA) to determine to what extent agencies can share client information so they might collectively database and respond to hoarding situations, agrees the task force's emphasis should not be on "government intrusion" but on offering support and assistance to the community.

"We want to save lives, and we want to not injure our people in the process," Parker says. "We're letting people know we're here to help them."