

## Helping Hoarders

Everybody knows somebody who is messy or a collector of knick-knacks, but more and more people are coming forward in need of help regarding the over-accumulation of stuff in mass quantities. Collecting and neglecting are easy to do when much of life revolves around cheap goods and convenient delivery, exhausted schedules, and well-being that falls to the wayside of underlying health conditions. A cocktail of items and illness or trauma can ultimately lead to a hoarding situation, and it can be difficult to get out of without help.

The first hurdle in seeking help requires overcoming thoughts and feelings about shame. Those who come forward often experience a fear of judgment. Families are sometimes embarrassed that they didn't know their loved one was hoarding or that they didn't help them sooner—hoarders themselves can be extremely self-conscious as well as protective of the things that they have accumulated. So when you get a hoarder or family member asking for help, it is a monumental step forward.

Reaper Clean, Fresno's local biohazard remediation company, receives hoarding clean-up inquiries a few times per month from all across the Central Valley. This initial conversation is crucial in determining the next steps and comfortability for all parties involved. However, being able to provide an estimate or service doesn't always happen right away. A family member may be calling on behalf of a hoarder, and the hoarder may not be aware that their loved one has called for help. Sometimes the person is deceased, and the family is just finding out about the death and the over-accumulation of stuff all at once. Or, there may be declining cognitive abilities or health conditions that would require rehabilitation or coming to terms with a new kind of care/legal arrangement, all of which may need to be planned out before the team can step in. Before respirators go on and shovels come out, some ground rules have to be established for safety.

Crime Scene Cleaners cannot go into a hoarding situation without consent, and they cannot quote hoarding jobs without first walking through and seeing the hoarding themselves. Consent also has to be in writing, and must be verbally maintained throughout the entire process. The level of privacy should also be discussed, as well as the details of the removal and any cleaning expectations. There is also a likelihood that repairs will be needed afterward - something Crime Scene Cleaners cannot do. Once a home is emptied, it will require a lot of additional work that may involve different field specialists (structural and pest-related) to bring the home back to a livable condition. There is no telling what that is until the hoarding has been removed and the space can be thoroughly evaluated.

In most cases, it is best that the hoarder not be present during the clean-up. It can take an emotional toll on the person as well as the team, and maintaining healthy boundaries is important. It also has a possibility to impede the amount of work being done. An example of this would be living in areas of the home where access was needed, cross-contamination, unwillingness to throw out specific personal property, conversing/distracting workers, or bringing things back inside that were already removed. If hoarders cannot leave the home but are willing to cooperate, it can be done, but labor hours will vary based on the situation at hand.

Reaper Clean has worked on hoarding jobs from start to finish in many different circumstances. The compiling of gross filth, trash, random items, animal waste, or packages may be familiar territory, but getting to know a person through their things has a way of bringing their humanity to the surface. From a young RN who fell into a deep depression and turned to alcohol during the onslaught of COVID-19, all the way to a retired grade school teacher with declining health also caring for her elderly pets and

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husband with dementia—hoarders weren't always living like this. Something happened to them, and something can happen again to create change for the better.

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