

Help Hoarders: Care for Them & Their Homes

You have to be a counselor as well as an agent when selling the home of a hoarder. Here's how you can put them in the right mental state for the sale.

FEBRUARY 2015 | BY ANN MEYERSON

The phenomenon of hoarding has gotten a lot of attention in the media. By now, we are all aware of the condition — but knowing what to do as a real estate professional when we encounter it is a different issue. In my 30-year career as an agent and counselor helping people with housing transitions, I have had to deal with this problem on more than a few occasions. While the statistics identify seniors as the largest group of hoarders, I have dealt with individuals as young as 42 who are grappling with this disorder.

A hoarding situation cannot be handled without professional intervention. The key to working with hoarders as property owners is to develop a plan of action in conjunction with listing the property. It is also critical to recognize the psychological ramifications of the cleanup and sale for the home owner. The role of the real estate practitioner is to be a nonthreatening ally who is supportive and knowledgeable.

Staging Isn't Enough to Solve the Problem

The plan of action has to include not only the hoarder but also any family members who are involved, and we must assist the individuals from both a psychological and physical approach. As real estate agents, our role is to be a resource for our sellers and to help them enlist the appropriate professionals. Until there is a support system in place, it will not be possible to get on with the task of cleaning and listing the property. Depending on the particulars of each case, you may need to involve social services, physicians, psychologists, or social workers.

A word of warning: It is not enough to simply prepare and stage the property. Hoarding is the sign of deeper psychological issues. If the property is merely cleaned up without the owner getting counseling, the problem will not be effectively addressed. The hoarding may very well reoccur.

In one instance shared with me by a coordinator with A Move Made Easy Inc., a Florida-based company helping seniors and people with disabilities relocate, the family ordered a quick total cleanup of their father's house without involving him. They failed to address the emotional impact the move would have on dad. After the sale and move, he exhibited very high anxiety and was reportedly not doing well.

Be More Than an Agent

With the support team involved, the practitioner can proceed with the physical preparation of the house. I listed the home of a young woman who inherited the property from her mother. Over the previous three years, Lisa had lived in the house and had accumulated considerable debris. Two of the rooms and the garage were completely inaccessible.

I strategized with her about a plan of action so we could get the house ready for sale and find her a more inviting place to live. Lisa shared with me that the reason that she had hired me was because of the nonjudgmental way that I approached the situation. Lisa said one agent she interviewed kept telling her to just get Febreze — and she spelled out the name for her three times.

Lisa's comment to me was: "Did she think just because I'm a hoarder, I'm stupid?"

Compassionate Strategies

Several specialists at A Move Made Easy and other organizational experts identified strategies that have been used to effectively assist with the cleanup of a hoarder's home.

- **Give the owner a way to remember their belongings.** Vicki Tate, owner of H.O.M.E. Home Organization Made Easy in Lake Worth, Fla., says she takes pictures of "anything of perceived value to the home owner. These items need to be discarded but remembered." While she is going through the belongings, she listens to the owner's stories about the history of each piece. This eases the emotional difficulty of discarding stuff and enables the hoarder to have a sense of control over the process.
- **Make a contract with the owner each day on what will be discarded.** Sharon Cofar, founder of A Move Made Easy, had an older client moving to a much smaller apartment. With the support of the client's adult son, they all agreed on a plan. "Because the woman was a hoarder, the downsizing with the client took many more days and hours than was usual," Cofar says. "We did a special contract with her each morning. The first day, the contract said: 'A Move Made Easy will not throw out anything without permission. Today, you give permission to throw out the following: old newspapers and old magazines.' Every day, a new contract was made with the client in regards to what could be disposed of."
- **Identify alternatives to throwing the owner's stuff away.** Another technique that helps the owner's transition is to have them identify items to be given to family members, sold, consigned, or donated to charity. This reinforces the perceived value of the pieces and gets the hoarder involved in what is happening. While all of these strategies require more time than it takes to simply haul things out to a Dumpster, they are far more effective in the long run. When the actual listing, negotiation, and sale occurs, the entire team can be supportive and work toward the same goal.

As real estate professionals, we all know that trust and cooperation are critical to conducting a successful sale. When working with hoarders, it is possible to have a win-win situation. Not only can we have an effective business transaction but we also have an opportunity to help someone suffering from this disease.

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Ann Meyerson

Ann Meyerson, SRES, is an agent with Keyes Real Estate in Boca Raton, Fla., and William Raveis Real Estate in Westport, Conn. She has a masters degree in counseling and a PhD in educational leadership.

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Highly informative article, thank you for publishing it. I think that hoarding and other disorders that have a direct impact on our jobs as real estate agents and brokers should be brought to the forefront of our continuing education offerings. This is something that is widespread across the nation, and for agents and brokers to learn how to effectively and compassionately work with the homeowner(s), this can only be something that will positively impact our services to our clients and the public.

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