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## Beach group identifies hoarders, helps them work to overcome the compulsion

BY SUSAN E. WHITE THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

VIRGINIA BEACH — Lee can't say how many dolls she's collected over the years. She lost count long after they disappeared behind heaving walls of cardboard boxes and plastic bags brimming with clothing, crafts and toys.

Her collections pack her spare bedrooms from floor to ceiling and spill over into the already cramped hallway of her three-bedroom home in the northeastern section of the city.

"After a while, you only see tunnel vision," said Lee, who asked that she be identified by only her middle name to protect her family. "I can't explain why I can't clean it up. If I could, I would fix it."

Lee is 70 and a hoarder. For more than 20 years, she has collected and excessively held onto items she thinks are invaluable. She receives counseling to help her better understand her behavior.

About 80 Beach residents who suffer from the compulsion have been identified over the past nine months. The effort, led by the city's Hoarding Services Support Group, is aimed at educating the public on the dangers of hoarding.

The group was created about a year ago after an elderly couple died in a house fire. The couple's hoarding contributed to their deaths, Beach fire officials said.

Since then, the group, which includes fire officials, police officers, social workers, housing experts and animal control officers, has been teaching fellow employees how to recognize hoarding behavior. A training video is being produced.

"We're trying to address the problem from a holistic approach," said David Hutcheson, the city's fire battalion chief.

Hutcheson said a database could help fire and police officials track homes that could be potentially dangerous.

"Anytime we can identify a problem in an earlier stage, we can get the support group involved and hopefully correct it before we lose life or property," he said.

Since the group's formation, the Human Services Department has handled four or five hoarding cases a month, said Barbara Pratt, a social work supervisor.

Hoarders once were considered pack rats. Recent studies at the New England Hoarding Consortium have shown that hoarders have signs of major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder and social phobia.

For years, Virginia Beach officials found hoarding mainly by happenstance. For example, a resident might call code enforcement to complain about junk in a neighbor's yard.

Those calls still come, but police, fire and rescue officials also have been identifying more residents after answering calls to their homes, Pratt said. Family members also make referrals, she said.

Lee says her son called Social Services around Christmas to report his concerns about her home and hoarding. She's lived there for 45 years, though her doll collecting became intensive after her three adult children left home, she said.

Some of the dolls are on display in her living room. They compete for attention among the mounds of mail, sewing material and baskets scattered across the floor and into her dining room and kitchen. Each day, she navigates a narrow pathway of carpeting throughout her house.

Challenges in her life seemed to exacerbate her problem. Two marriages ended in divorce. The store where she once worked closed. Her parents died. Magazines, books and clothing piled up.

"I think I've just had all this loss and that I've been needing to fill that big space that's in here," she said.

Lee said she's tried to organize her home, but she can't concentrate on the task. And when the clutter becomes overwhelming? "I get out of the house and I go shopping and I bring back more," she said.

Hoarding isn't limited to the elderly, though many who hoard are seniors who struggle mentally and physically with throwing things out, Pratt said. Not everyone wants help, she said.

For those who do, the first step is making their homes safe, Pratt said. "Working with them to maintain it that way, that's the bigger challenge," she said.

Sometimes, a volunteer or "companion" is brought into a hoarder's home to help with discarding items and for socialization, Pratt said.

Research also has shown that hoarders struggle with the step-by-step process of throwing things away.

Lee is starting small. She hopes a professional organizer will help her decide what to keep and what to discard from her bedroom, including clothing that piles at the foot of her bed.

"I have a vision in my head of what I want it to look like," she said. "But it still seems overwhelming."



**VICKI CRONIS/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT** Beach resident Lee – identified in this story by only her middle name – has been hoarding items she finds invaluable for more than 20 years.



**VICKI CRONIS/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT** Lee, above, hopes a professional organizer can help her sort through the items in her three-bedroom Beach home. Last year, city officials said an elderly couple's hoarding contributed to their deaths in a house fire. The incident sparked the creation of the Hoarding Services Support Group.