

South Tahoe cracking down on hoarders



Hoarding issues become health and safety issues. These are before and after pictures of a South Lake Tahoe residence. Photos/Provided

By Bill Potts

Hoarding! We've all seen it, and shows like "Extreme Hoarders" have brought us up close and personal with some of the people and places afflicted with pathological collecting disorder.

I encounter residences affected by hoarding while investigating complaints of substandard housing or during required inspections under the Multi-Family Dwelling Inspection Program.

Typically, the heavy clutter within a hoarder's residence constitutes a violation of several health and safety codes and represents a potential hazard to all of the building occupants. Excessive storage of combustibles, blocking of exit pathways and obstruction of egress windows in bedrooms are some of the fire code violations observed. There may also be violations of health code, due to the propensity on the part

of some hoarders to collect food and other perishables.

Ultimately, it comes down to evaluating the effect of the hoarder's habits on the building as a whole.

In high density apartment complexes many walls are shared and unfortunately one occupant's habits can have a profound effect on their neighbor's health and safety. In situations where an imminent fire and health hazard is present and the hoarder is unwilling to take immediate action, condemnation of the dwelling may be the only practical choice.

In such cases, removal of the hoarder and other occupants from the dwelling is necessary, followed by mandatory abatement (clean-up) of the premises.

The good news is that in the majority of cases, conditions are not severe enough to warrant immediate drastic intervention. Working with hoarders is difficult and may require the involvement of several government regulatory agencies, including county Adult Protective Services (APS), Child Protective Services (CPS), Mental Health, Environmental Management and, of course, the South Lake Tahoe's Building Division.

However, using a firm, coordinated approach with monitoring and well defined goals, progress can be made until compliance is eventually achieved.

The pictures were taken in the residence of a hoarder that came to the attention of the building division nearly two years ago. I prescribed a prioritized, incremental method for reduction of combustible materials and clearing of exit pathways and egress windows. This gentleman still has work to do, but as you can see from the pictures, he has come a long way toward compliance and everybody is safer now.

I'm proud of what he has done so far.

Bill Potts is the senior housing inspector for South Lake Tahoe.