

Hoarding and Squalor Policy



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1. Purpose

This policy outlines how WHL identify and respond to situations of hoarding and/or squalor in rental properties. This policy especially outlines the complex nature of hoarding and squalor behaviours and the requirement for a response that is trauma-informed and prioritising the safety of renters.

2. Statement of commitment

WHL is committed to:

- Responding to instances of hoarding and squalor with empathy, respect and dignity
- Supporting the self-determination of renters to make their own decisions
- Providing renters with the resources and supports required to assist them in sustaining their tenancies
- Ensuring the safety of the renter and neighbours
- Promoting ongoing training and awareness about the complexity of hoarding and squalor
- Approaching hoarding and squalor with a collaborative mindset

3. Scope

This policy covers all renters of WHL properties and all staff at WHL.

4. Responsibilities

4.1 Board

- To be aware of this policy

4.2 CEO

- To receive reports on issues pertaining to hoarding and squalor at the Operational Management Group meetings.

4.3 Operations Manager

- To oversee implementation of this policy, respond to issues where necessary, refer complex matters onto the CEO if required
- To form relationships with network groups that may specialise in hoarding and squalor

4.4 Tenancy Services Manager

- To be aware of this policy, receive and respond to incidents and provide leadership to the tenancy team on issues of hoarding and squalor.
- To escalate any complex cases to the Operations Manager
- To identify training opportunities for staff about managing hoarding and squalor
- To form relationships with network groups that may specialise in hoarding and squalor

4.5 All staff

- To be aware of this policy, to investigate solutions for incidents of hoarding and squalor
- To report all incidents of hoarding and squalor appropriately
- To respond to hoarding and squalor in a way that is empathetic and trauma-informed
- To make referrals to appropriate supports with the consent of renters impacted by hoarding and squalor

5. What is hoarding and squalor?

5.1 Definitions

Hoarding	The accumulation of belongings over an extended period of time that has resulted in unsanitary or unsafe conditions. This behaviour compromises the intended use of the premises.
Squalor	Living in a state of neglect over an extended period of time that has resulted in unsanitary or unsafe living conditions

Hoarding and squalor may be present individually or together and can have overlapping elements. The behaviours exist on a spectrum of severity and renters may not be aware that their behaviour meets the criteria. Hoarding as a disorder is only diagnosable by medical professionals and WHL's role is to identify hoarding in properties and provide referrals to assist in a holistic approach.

5.2 Demonstrated behaviours

Hoarding and squalor is a very complex behavioural issue that can evolve gradually and be difficult to identify until it becomes a serious problem. The behaviours associated with hoarding and squalor may stem from one or more of the following factors:

- Trauma stemming from violence, childhood abuse, war, physical and emotional abuse, neglect and more
- Previous and current substance use
- Mental health disorders such as schizophrenia, depression, personality disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder and anxiety
- Neurodevelopment disorders such as autism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
- Acquired brain injuries
- Dementia
- Poverty
- Physical health issues

- Strong beliefs in sustainability and not wasting objects

6. Identifying hoarding and squalor

6.1 When might hoarding and squalor be identified?

WHL staff may be alerted to a hoarding and squalor situation through the following ways:

- Routine inspections where Tenancy or Assets staff are physically inspecting the property themselves
- Information or complaints from neighbours who may be impacted by smells or goods left in common areas
- Information from supports who may have consent to share information with WHL

If staff members are alerted that there is suspicion of serious hoarding and squalor at a property, they will issue a Notice of Entry and conduct an inspection to investigate this. Staff will communicate with the renter prior to the inspection about their concerns and the support available. If a support service is already engaged, they will be encouraged to attend this inspection.

6.2 Common signs of hoarding and squalor

Some common signs that help identify hoarding and squalor include:

- Ongoing difficult in parting with items, regardless of their value
- Feeling a need to 'save items' and feeling upset at the thought of getting rid of them
- A build up of clutter that makes it difficult to access or use rooms
- Build up of food or trash to a large, unsanitary level
- Disorganised stacks or piles of items such as newspapers, clothes, paperwork, books or sentimental items
- Being unable to use furniture (i.e., bed) due to an accumulation of goods
- Limited ability to walk through the property unimpeded
- Having more animals than what is safe or reasonable for the property

7. Conducting a risk assessment

7.1 Tools and resources

Staff should utilise the "Clutter Image Rating Scale (CIRS)" to assess the level and impact of hoarding in a property. This is a tool that requires assessment of the amount of clutter inside a property against photographs with examples of differing levels.

If the renter consents and it is safe to do so, staff can also utilise the "Hoarding Rating Scale (HRS-I)" This focuses more on renter behaviours and feelings and captures the impact of hoarding on their wellbeing.

Staff will use this information to discuss their concerns with the Tenancy Services Manager.

7.2 Unsafe premises

Staff must also look for signs of an unsafe premises when conducting a risk assessment. This assists in identifying the priority areas for addressing. This may include:

- Fire hazards (see 8.4 below)
- Items stacked too high

- Tripping hazards
- Lack of safe egress
- Severe mould or damp
- Inability to prepare food or practice hygiene

Staff will specifically discuss these concerns with the renter to see if the premises can be made safer.

8. Responding to hoarding and squalor

8.1 Whole service response

Issues of hoarding and squalor require a holistic service response and it is critical that each case is linked with the unique services that can provide assistance. This will be determined by the nature of the issue and the existing supports that might already be in place.

8.2 Referrals to services

Some services for referral may include:

- Tenancy Plus (via local Housing Office)
- Disability services
- Fire Services Victoria
- Specific support services
- GP or medical services
- RSPCA

Some services that may be able to assist include:

Sustaining tenancies	
Tenancy Plus	A program aimed at supporting renters to remain in social housing. Accessible through local Housing Office.
NEAMI	Offer a range of programs included case management, supportive services and housing support.
ERMHA Community Connections Program	Supports people in low cost accommodation and connects them to housing and health services (Casey, Cardinia Shire or Greater Dandenong)
Housing for the Aged Action Group (HAAG)	Home at Last program assists persons over 50 who are at risk of homelessness and can link to services to assist with various issues.
Wombat Singles Support Program	A program for single adults in THM housing (with capacity for outreach in long term) who can provide case management and referrals to services. Based in the West, accessible via Unison (Seddon).
EACH	Offers a range of support in wellbeing, mental health, housing and support for older adults.
Salvation Army Communication Connections Programme	An outreach support program responding to the support and housing needs of people with complex needs who are residing in low cost housing.

Hoarding services	
The Crowded House	Offers secondary consultations and home based therapeutic and practical support for individuals affected by hoarding. Melbourne based and able to assist via Telehealth.
Buried in Treasures Program	16 x 2 hourly sessions run by an Occupational Therapy Team. Maroondah Council can assist adults in the Maroondah, Knox and Yarra Ranges. Salvation Army can assist adults in the Boroondara, Monash, Whitehouse and Manningham areas
Swinburne Psychology Clinic Compulsive Hoarding and Acquiring Group	A group program (Medicare rebate available) to assist individuals to address hoarding and squalor issues through Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
Aged and disability services	
Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP)	Services for people over 65 in a range of different areas, including sustaining housing and wellbeing
Home and Community Care Program for Younger People	A Victorian government program that assists people under 65 with a disability and can assist to referral and linking to other services

8.3 Consent and privacy

Consent must be obtained before any referrals are made or information is shared. Exceptions to this include:

- Immediate threats to danger, where staff must call 000
- Child safety concerns where the DFFH Child Protection Department must be alerted
- Fire Services Victoria notifications
- Applications to VCAT if approved by Senior Management

Renters are entitled to withdraw consent for WHL to speak with other services at any point.

Renter privacy and dignity will be central when handling information about hoarding and squalor. Information will not be disclosed to neighbours or any persons during the process. See WHL's *Privacy and Confidentiality Policy* to learn about how WHL handles sensitive information.

8.4 Fire Services Victoria notification

Staff must complete a notification with Fire Services Victoria where there are concerns that emergency responders would not be able to have safe egress into a property. It enables a discreet electronic alert for firefighters who are attending a property with a high fuel load. This is an anonymous process and the name of the renter is not disclosed. Renters should also be encouraged to consider the following fire harm reduction techniques:

- Unblocking all exits / entry points
- Disconnecting electrical appliances not required for us

- Identify the use of naked flames (e.g., candles) and remove them
- Ensuring power boards are never overloaded or plugged into each other
- Widening pathways where possible
- Establishing a one-metre clearance around all heating sources

9. Tenancies that are at risk due to hoarding and squalor

Staff will work closely with the renter to attempt to make referrals to appropriate services to assist in addressing the impact that hoarding has on the property. Where there are ongoing issues around property damage, safety for the renter or neighbours, or nuisance arising from smells, this may result in WHL pursuing VCAT action.

This will only occur as a last resort and in conjunction with a thorough human rights assessment.

Renters who are actively working with services to address their hoarding and squalor behaviours will be encouraged to continue with this pathway and this will impact whether WHL pursue VCAT action.

If WHL intends to pursue VCAT action regarding hoarding and squalor, the renter will be offered a referral to a legal service that may assist them with the process and provide other support such as links to mental health services.

10. Documenting and reporting

Staff will document incidents of hoarding and squalor on WHL's renter database, including within 24 hours of conducting an inspection. This information will include:

- The date the hoarding and squalor became known
- A summary of the risk assessment undertaken during inspection
- Proposed action and the timeline for this
- Any outcomes from referrals or supports
- All conversations with the renter about this

11. Staff training and development

WHL is committed to the ongoing development of staff in this area so that renters who are affected by hoarding are treated with professionalism, respect and dignity. It is important that WHL stay up to date on new information. WHL will identify suitable training opportunities for staff, send a representative to relevant sector meetings and identify a 'champion' in the team who can assist other staff with hoarding and squalor issues.

12. Reviewing

This policy will be reviewed every two years.

13. Related documents

- WHL Privacy and Confidentiality Policy
- WHL Renter Damage Policy

- WHL Ending Tenancies Policy
- WHL Renter Charges Policy
- DFFH: Hoarding and Squalor – A Practical Resource for Service providers
- Clutter Image Rating Scale (CIRS)
- Hoarding Rating Scale (HRS-I)

14. Relevant legislation

- Residential Tenancies Act 1997 (Vic)
- Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (Vic)
- Housing Act 1983 (Vic)
- Information Privacy Act 2000 (Vic)