

United States Senate

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6400

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September 17, 2024

The Honorable Adrienne Todman
Acting Secretary
Department of Housing and Urban Development
451 7th Street SW
Washington, DC 20410

Dear Secretary Todman:

I write today regarding a need for action to address hoarding disorder (HD) among older adults. HD disproportionately affects older adults, a population that is projected to grow significantly in coming years. As America ages, it can expect an increase in hoarding behavior, with consequences for older Americans and their families and communities. *The Consequences of Clutter*, a Majority Staff report released by the Senate Special Committee on Aging, discusses the implications of HD for an aging Nation.¹ The report includes information on the problems HD poses in communities across the Nation, and it provides a series of recommendations for how the federal government can respond. I urge the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to review *The Consequences of Clutter* and to take action to address HD in America.

HD is a chronic and progressive condition that causes a person to acquire excessive possessions that are not discarded and prevent the normal use of living spaces.² Studies suggest an estimated six percent of older adults have HD, compared to roughly two percent of the general population.³ Older adults who exhibit hoarding behavior face significant consequences for their health, safety, and ability to function.⁴ For example, excess clutter can prevent living spaces from being used as intended and give rise to problems such as falls, malnutrition, and medical complications.⁵

¹ See Majority Staff, Senate Special Committee on Aging, *The Consequences of Clutter: How Hoarding Disorder Affects America's Older Adults, First Responders, and Their Communities*, July 2024, (hereinafter "Aging Majority Staff Report"), https://www.aging.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/the_consequences_of_clutter.pdf.

² Randy O. Frost et al., "Excessive Acquisition in Hoarding," *Journal of Anxiety Disorders* 23, no 5, June 2009, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2735347/>; See also Randy O. Frost and Tamara L. Hartl, "A Cognitive-Behavioral Model of Compulsive Hoarding," *Behavioral Research Therapy* 34, no 4, 1996, at 341.

³ Adam Postlethwaite et al., "Prevalence of Hoarding Disorder: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Affective Disorders* 256, September 2019, at 312; David M. Roane et al., "Hoarding in the Elderly: A Critical Review of the Recent Literature," *International Psychogeriatrics* 29, no 7, 2017, at 1081.

⁴ *Supra*, note 1, Aging Majority Staff Report, at B-023, Statement from James C. Appleby.

⁵ Catherine R. Ayers et al., "Functional Impairment in Geriatric Hoarding Participants," *Journal of Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders* 1, no 4, October 2012, at 263; Gretchen J. Diefenbach et al., "Characteristics of Hoarding in Older Adults," *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* 21, no 10, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3530651/>; "Risks Caused by Hoarding," Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services, last accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/risks-caused-by-hoarding>.

Hoarding behavior also places older adults at risk of isolation, as the behavior is associated with stigma and often reduces access to family and social services.⁶ Further, individuals suffering from HD are more likely to be evicted, and research suggests that evictions related to HD are linked with homelessness.⁷ Elder homelessness is already increasing significantly in the United States and is projected to continue increasing over the next ten years.⁸ If not properly addressed, HD could exacerbate the existing homelessness crisis.

As HD harms the health and well-being of older adults, it also negatively affects local communities and first responders. Hoarding conditions can bring about a variety of public health risks, such as animal and insect infestations or the broader spread of illnesses.⁹ Meanwhile, medical responses in cluttered households are complicated by “limited access and collapse potential” and often require specialized personnel and extra resources.¹⁰ Cluttered environments are also more likely to give rise to fires, and those fires are more likely to be severe.¹¹ Responding to a fire at a cluttered household is more difficult than responding at an uncluttered household, and poses a greater danger of injury or death for first responders.¹²

Many states and local communities have taken steps to address HD, but resource limitations are a challenge. Some local governments have formed hoarding task forces,¹³ which are shown to increase the sensitivity of how local agencies respond to hoarding behavior, increase the adoption of evidence-based practices, and improve education and information sharing.¹⁴ Unfortunately, hoarding task forces are frequently underfunded and difficult to maintain.¹⁵ Funding and resource limitations extend beyond hoarding taskforces, with community organizations and local services providers similarly reporting being unable to serve local needs.¹⁶

⁶ Sage Bates et al., “Buried in Stigma: Experimental Investigation of the Impact of Hoarding Depictions in Reality Television on Public Perception,” *Journal of Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders* 26, July 2020, at 1-2; *Supra*, note 1, Aging Majority Staff Report, at B-040, B-069, B-072, B-092, and B-112, Statements of Jan M. Enders, Diane M. Terada, Lindsay Heckler, Ashley B. McCullough, and Sandra Swogger.

⁷ Carolyn I. Rodriguez and Randy O. Frost, *Hoarding Disorder: A Comprehensive Clinical Guide*, Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association Publishing, 2023, at 182, (hereinafter “Comprehensive Clinical Guide”).

⁸ Dennis Culhane et al., “The Emerging Crisis of Aged Homelessness,” University of Pennsylvania, at 3, <https://aisp.upenn.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Emerging-Crisis-of-Aged-Homelessness.pdf>.

⁹ Gina Fleury et al., “Compulsive Hoarding: Overview and Implications for Public Health Nurses,” *Journal of Community Health Nursing* 29, no 3, 2012, at 158.

¹⁰ *Supra*, note 1, Aging Majority Staff Report, at B-037-B-038, Statement of Sean Patrick Carroll.

¹¹ “The Fire Safety Dangers of Having Too Much ‘Stuff’ in the Workplace and in the Home,” National Institutes of Health, last accessed August 22, 2024, <https://ors.od.nih.gov/News/Pages/The-Fire-Safety-Dangers-of-Having-Too-Much-%27Stuff%27-in-the-Workplace-and-in-the-Home.aspx>.

¹² “Hoarding,” National Fire Protection Association, last accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.nfpa.org/Education-and-Research/Emergency-Response/Hoarding>; Ryan Pennington, “Tactical Considerations for Hoarding Fires,” *Firehouse*, February 15, 2021, <https://www.firehouse.com/operations-training/article/21206439/tactical-considerations-for-hoarding-fires>.

¹³ “The Role of Hoarding Task Forces,” International OCD Foundation, last accessed August 22, 2024, <https://hoarding.iocdf.org/for-community-responders/working-with-hoarding-disorder-in-the-community/the-role-of-hoarding-task-forces/>.

¹⁴ Christiana Bratiotis, “Community Hoarding Task Forces: A Comparative Case Study of Five Task Forces in the United States,” *Health and Social Care in the Community* 21, no 3, 2013, at 246.

¹⁵ For example, a hoarding task force in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, disbanded after five years while the Chicagoland Hoarding Task Force reports that it has a “shoestring budget” and relies on donations. *See Supra*, note 1, Aging Majority Staff Report, at B-048 and B-074, Statements of Allegheny County Department of Human Services and Chicagoland Hoarding Task Force.

¹⁶ *Supra*, note 1, Aging Majority Staff Report, at 37.

The federal government must step up to support people with HD, their communities, and their families.

HD has a clear connection to housing issues in America, yet HUD appears to have taken limited action to address hoarding behavior. HD often comes to the attention of landlords¹⁷ and can result in complicated and expensive eviction proceedings.¹⁸ Further, tenants with HD are entitled to reasonable accommodations to stay in their homes,¹⁹ yet the legal interventions used by landlords frequently underemphasize mental health treatments that could serve as accommodations.²⁰ HUD oversees our Nation's housing programs and enforces fair housing laws,²¹ and, accordingly, should play a key role in addressing HD. HUD does have two online resources that mention HD,²² and HUD's Community Development Block Grant Program can provide funding to programs that address HD.²³ However, HUD can and must do more to identify information and resources specific to HD.

The Consequences of Clutter includes recommendations to improve the federal response to HD and support older adults, families, and communities struggling with the condition.²⁴ The report recommends that:

- HUD should offer technical assistance and training specific to hoarding behavior for landlords and public housing programs. Training and technical assistance should include an overview of the need to provide a reasonable accommodation to people with HD. It should also include tips and evidence-based best practices for intervention, including harm reduction.²⁵
- Federal departments should increase and improve how they track the impact of hoarding behavior. Improved data collection should include better data related to how hoarded households and rental properties affect first responders. It should also include better data related to how HD hinders the ability of older adults to access federal programs, such as public housing or housing assistance.²⁶
- The federal government, including HUD, should seek input from people with HD and their family members when considering new policies and initiatives related to the condition.²⁷

¹⁷ *Id.*, at B-124, Statement of Milene Maurin; *Supra*, note 7, Comprehensive Clinical Guide, at 182.

¹⁸ *Supra*, note 1, Aging Majority Staff Report, at 21.

¹⁹ Lauren Brasil, "Issue Spotlight: Hoarding and Fair Housing," *Fair Housing Project Newsletter*, February 21, 2019, <https://www.fairhousingnc.org/newsletter/issue-spotlight-hoarding-and-fair-housing/>. See also 42 U.S.C. § 3604(f)(3)(B).

²⁰ *Supra*, note 7, Comprehensive Clinical Guide, at 182-183.

²¹ "Questions and Answers About HUD," HUD, last accessed September 11, 2024, <https://www.hud.gov/about/qaintro>.

²² *Supra*, note 1, Aging Majority Staff Report, at 41.

²³ *Id.*, at 41.

²⁴ *Id.*, at 43-45.

²⁵ *Id.*, at 43-44.

²⁶ *Id.*, at 44.

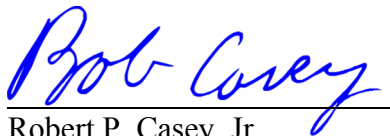
²⁷ *Id.*, at 45.

The United States is rapidly aging, a trend that will require the federal government to attend to issues that it had not previously prioritized. Because HD disproportionately impacts older adults, families and communities throughout the United States can expect to see an uptick in hoarding behavior. The federal government must be prepared to respond.

Maureen, an 80-year-old with HD, shared the need for “more people out there willing to listen and help, making good suggestions, being positive.”²⁸ HUD can play a role in creating a positive federal response for Maureen and other older adults with HD. I look forward to working with you to establish that response. Accordingly, I ask that the Department review *The Consequences of Clutter* and identify opportunities for HUD to offer new resources and assistance for landlords, tenants, and communities dealing with hoarding behavior.

I look forward to remaining updated on the Department’s work on HD, as well as any barriers to progress and necessary support from Congress. Please do not hesitate to reach out to Doug Hartman with my Aging Committee staff if you have questions.

Sincerely,



Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator
Chairman, Special Committee
on Aging

²⁸ *Id.*, at B-020, Statement of Maureen in Connecticut.