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## More support needed for hoarders; pandemic may have worsened behaviour



The aftermath of a fire that broke out in Block 3, Upper Aljunied Lane on Aug 19, 2022. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG



**Syarafana Shafeeq**

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SINGAPORE - The brother and sister who lived in the Jurong East flat where a fire broke out on Aug 16 were among a "handful of cases" known to the authorities for their habit of collecting discarded items, and ignored attempts to engage them.

Mr Huang Mingquan, 48, died in the fire but his 50-year-old sister, Ms Huang Xiumei, survived. Their next-door neighbours had to be rescued by firefighters when the clutter outside the flat also caught fire and blocked their way out, while the smouldering rubble inside the flat was so thick it reignited the next day.

In a second fire in Aljunied three days later, piles of bags and clothes reaching up to the windows were found inside the flat.

While hoarding is a long-standing problem, some social service groups say they have seen more instances of it since the start of the pandemic, which brought about greater levels of stress and social isolation.

Habitat for Humanity Singapore said it had seen an approximately 10 per cent increase in cases over the past year, taking into account other factors like greater awareness of the issue and more reporting of hoarding.

Ms Fion Phua, founder of volunteer group Keeping Hope Alive, said the social distancing necessitated by the pandemic could have worsened hoarding behaviour.

She said: "Many people who have hoarding issues may have their conditions aggravated as they can only find solace in having relationship with items or memories, rather than talking or having a proper relationship with a human being."



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With the risk it could pose to public health and safety, MPs are calling for a review of measures to declutter homes where there is excessive accumulation of items.

One of them, Bukit Panjang MP Liang Eng Hwa, who raised the issue with the Ministry of National Development (MND) in Parliament last year, told The Straits Times: "The state of hoarding in some of the HDB flats remains very serious. Coupled with the increasing needs to charge more electrical devices at home, we need to review the current measures as well as look into new measures to ensure fire safety.

"One possibility is to empower Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) officers to inspect homes and to be able to issue orders to household to reduce clutter if they are assessed to be of significant fire safety risks."

Mr Liang said that engagement with residents who hoard and their families is important, as the habit of hoarding may return again over time.

"Often the situation cannot be resolved overnight but would require continuous attention and interventions. We need an all-hands approach to help the hoarders."

Yet, authorities have indeed been taking an all-hands approach to this thorny problem for close to a decade. In 2014, a Hoarding Task Force that involves several government agencies and ministries was set up to tackle the issue in a coordinated and sustainable manner.

Last year, the MND said in response to parliamentary questions that the Municipal Services Office is leading a multi-agency workgroup to address hoarding cases in a holistic manner. This included developing a Hoarding Management Framework to guide officers across agencies to resolve hoarding cases systematically.

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Currently, once feedback is received about hoarding, HDB steps in to advise the resident to remove excess items. In severe cases, HDB may work with an agency like SCDF to declutter the flat and clear the corridor for the safety of residents.

The person who is hoarding can also be referred to the Agency for Integrated Care and the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) for professional treatment if mental health issues are involved.

Minister for Sustainability and the Environment Grace Fu, who oversees the ward where the Jurong East fire occurred, said the workgroup may also get help from non-governmental organisations such as the Singapore Association for Mental Health to engage the resident involved, but will also take concrete steps to declutter the homes, such as taking enforcement actions, setting a date for decluttering and providing the manpower to do so on that day.

"Hoarding is a complex problem often involving psychiatric and social causes," she said in response to queries from ST.

Of the residents involved, she noted: "They often do not respond to our house calls, written advice and warning, and may turn emotional when attempts are made to clear their belongings. Even after things are cleared, it is not uncommon that hoarding will resume."

That there is no silver bullet or quick fix is clear. An IMH study last year that included interviews with members of the Hoarding Task Force found that hoarders resist help, and even trying to enter their homes to start the decluttering process is difficult. Their findings echo similar studies done in the United States.

Help groups say decluttering is a long and laborious process of engagement before change is even possible. Habitat Singapore said case workers can spend an average of two to four years engaging the homeowners to build the relationship and trust needed to convince them to let go of their things.

Even then, residents may change their minds and become very resistant during a purge, or repeatedly cancel scheduled sessions.

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Ms Phua said her volunteers often face temper flare-ups and scoldings from the resident whose things are being removed, and that compassion and managing one's emotions well are necessary to help a hoarder make progress.

For former hoarder Ng Koon Guan, 58, reading about fires and pest infestations in homes of hoarders never gave him much pause, though his one-room flat was full of discarded electronic appliances picked up from walks around his neighbourhood in Chinatown.

What changed was when the former taxi driver was diagnosed with cancer in May, which forced him to sit down and consider what would happen to his home if he dies. His wife, Madam Foong Yoke Cheng, 53, has a weak knee and cannot lift heavy things.

Mr Ng slowly gave away his things to friends and neighbours, but there are still items in the flat that he cannot bear to part with, including six television sets, and boxes of metal parts that are now stacked neatly in boxes above his wardrobe.



Mr Ng Koon Guan and Madam Foong Yoke Cheng's home after decluttering in June. ST PHOTO: SYARAFANA SHAFEEQ

Touch Community Services' assistant director for active ageing Kelvin Lee said that isolated and frail seniors with cognitive impairment or mental health issues are often the hardest to reach.

"Very often, they do not want to engage others or allow anyone to enter their homes," he said. "Such cases inevitably lead to lapses in personal hygiene and deterioration in the condition of their homes."

This impacts their neighbours and often strains relationships in the community without suitable support and intervention.

Moving forward, Mr Lee said early intervention to engage seniors and improve their mental well-being is important as underlying mental health disorders make it harder for people with hoarding behaviour to easily accept help.

He said: "Social and community care workers can help seniors build a good network of support, encourage them to stay socially engaged and learn how to take better care of their physical and mental health."



Mr Ng Koon Guan and Madam Foong Yoke Cheng's home after they decluttered in June. ST PHOTO: SYARAFANA SHAFEEQ

Neighbours can also play a role in tackling the problem, the groups said.

Habitat Singapore said it is important to not pass nasty remarks or nag the person hoarding as it may cause a vicious circle of conflict, and worsen hoarding behaviour.

It said: "Such comments usually overwhelm the person, and would remind them again of why shutting people out from their lives or their house is a better choice for them."

Agreeing, Ms Phua said: "Please be compassionate and understanding to hoarders as they have their own personal war to fight. They want to live in a nice home too but are not able to. Their home is a reflection of the state of their mind and heart."

Ultimately, every case has to be treated on its own terms, said Ms Fu.

The Yuhua MP said she had personally made house calls and participated in the decluttering for some cases.

"I have learnt to appreciate that we need to treat each case with care, taking into consideration their individual circumstances and taking the course of action that best serve the collective interest of the hoarders, their family members and their neighbours," she said.

- Additional reporting by Shermaine Ang

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