Hoarding Task Force Summit

March 4, 2010/Granite Reef Senior Center/Scottsdale

Anthony Kern, Code Enforcement Officer from the City of El Mirage, introduced himself and explained the reason he organized the task force was to address life safety issues for people that hoard including: infestations, dead animals, trash, and debris. He stated that his goal is to provide an alternative to jail and recently an 80 year old lady spent 30 days in jail in El Mirage, but it is understood the issue is more of a mental health problem.

The people attending the meeting introduced themselves and included Building Officials, Code Enforcement Officers, Social Workers, Fire Personnel, Mental Health Professionals, Police, the Sherriff’s Department, and the Humane Society. Gathering resources to help people was a reoccurring topic. The next meeting will focus on who can provide what assistance.

Mr. Kern explained the assignment from the last meeting was to gather people from different agencies to start a dialogue. He stated that he understood people who hoard don’t see their items as trash but as their “stuff”, but that his job is to clean up the property. He said that California had an impressive program and he is trying to start something similar in Arizona.

The conversation turned to animal welfare, as it relates to people who hoard, led by a representative from the Humane Society. Animals become a deep emotional connection and it is devastating to hoarders to have their animals removed. Often when animals are removed they are quickly replaced by even more animals. It sometimes takes hours to develop enough of a relationship with someone to be able to enter their home and if the animals have to be removed, that trust will never return making the situation very difficult. The people that hoard are not intending to harm their animals, and it was restated that this is a mental health issue. There are no animal cruelty laws specific to hoarding. There was also a strong desire to involve the City of Phoenix in the discussion—especially as it relates to animal welfare.

An example of a Korean War vet squatting on property was given. The question of who to contact to help get him out of this unsafe situation was raised.

There was a conversation about the SAIL program (Senior Adult Independent Living) through the Area Agency on Aging and how staff from that program can help to build relationships with people to begin working through hoarding issues. The staff tries to get the property cleaned up and deal with emotional issues. They serve people 60 and over and people of any age with disabilities. Area Agency on Aging is coordinating a March 19th discussion of elder abuse, and will gather more information on hoarding then.

It was discussed that there are different levels of hoarding, from saving too much stuff to life safety issues. Money to fund a program to help hoarders was discussed because many of the people are low income with no resources or support. It was restated that it is difficult to find someone to help. A member of the Code Enforcement League stated that this Hoarding Task Force has been adopted by the League as part of a non-profit. Code Enforcement deals with the problem when it is extreme and often they don’t know of an issue until there is a complaint. One idea was to have judges assign counseling instead of jail time for people that get cited. There will be an annual conference of code enforcement and everyone on the hoarding task force will be invited to a talk by a hoarding expert.

The City of Scottsdale hoarding task force was discussed. When a hoarding case is determined, they have a system in place to involve first responders, police, social workers, city attorneys and code enforcement to determine a course of action. That program will be discussed more in depth at a future meeting.

It was stated that there is a difference between someone in a crisis versus a prevention situation. Educating family and the community about the issues before it becomes a crisis situation may be one key. Many people that hoard do not see it as a problem. It was pointed out that with the lack of services currently available, the worry is that too many new hoarding cases would be brought forward overwhelming social workers.

There was a discussion of increasing communication between departments and agencies. Many times staff is not aware of all the resources. Issues were raised about individual living standards, community standards, when to cite a hoarder, client’s rights, cultural identity, and the fact that mental illness is not a crime.

Anthony Pagliuca, Police Crisis Intervention Specialist from Scottsdale, presented a power point presentation on Emergent and Non-Emergent mental health petitions. He explained the process and the difference between Emergent and Non-Emergent. The question arose as to who pays for the clean up the property if an order is instated. Mr. Pagliuca stated that he is not aware of a PAD being used for a hoarding case yet, but that it could be an option.

The discussion turned to the high rate of recidivism for hoarding cases. One idea put forward is to have a flow chart explaining different scenarios and what to do in those instances (if..then). It was discussed that only a very small percentage of people change their hoarding behavior.

For next meeting (possibly May 6th):

* Identify resources—please send information about who you are and what you can provide to the task force to dbrower@scottsdaleaz.gov and she will collate for dissemination
* Take a closer look at Scottsdale’s program
* Distribute the mission statement of the task force
* Discuss solutions currently available