1. H052 Hoarding Policy **Purpose**

The purpose of this policy is to provide clear guidance on how YWCA Australia including housing subsidiaries (YWCA) are to approach and manage situations of compulsive hoarding in YWCA properties.

This policy enables YWCA’s housing subsidiaries to meet the following regulatory standards:

* *The registered agency has policies and procedures which strive to sustain tenancies.*
* *The registered agency establishes and maintains arrangements that are adequate to ensure renters and residents with support needs receive appropriate support, if relevant and where available, to maintain their tenancies.*
* *The provider manages community housing assets in accordance with the specific legal and policy property condition requirements relevant to its jurisdiction.*
1. **Scope**

This policy applies to all YWCA staff, contractors and volunteers involved in tenancy management and property maintenance (Employees).

The policy applies to both residental rental agreements and rooming house agreements. Unless stated otherwise, references to “renters” include rooming house residents and references to “tenancies” include rooming house residencies.

1. **Definitions**

Compulsive hoarding is a behavioural pattern involving an excessive accumulation of possessions and causing significant distress or impairment to the individual.

1. **Background**

Hoarding may involve obsessive collecting of items, but more often it is an inability to dispose of standard household items that are no longer needed. Commonly hoarded items include personal papers, newspapers, clothing, furniture, appliances, food, household rubbish, animals and hard rubbish. Most people have most of these things in their home, but compulsive hoarding takes this to an excessive level, often severely reducing access to essential areas of the property such as the bedroom, kitchen and bathroom. Hoarders may experience a high degree of discomfort, distress or shame, but feel powerless to change their behaviour.

Hoarding was only recently been defined as a mental disorder, in the 5th edition of the DSM (2013). People affected by hoarding may experience a high level of isolation; they may be unaware that their behaviour is a risk to themselves and others, and will often reject offers of assistance, fearing this will result in removal of their possessions. There is a strong association between hoarding and depression.

Situations involving hoarding behaviour and/or squalid living environments are complex, and a broad range of service providers needs to be involved. Progress can be slow, and many cases are not resolved. Often, the goal is simply to ensure the safety of the household and to minimise risk.

1. **Policy Statement**

In cases of hoarding, YWCA seeks to balance four key principles:

* renters must be treated with dignity and their legal rights respected;
* the safety of the household is paramount;
* the safety, health and amenity of neighbours should not be adversely affected;
* YWCA’s property assets must be properly maintained.

When compulsive hoarding is identified in a YWCA property, Employees will engage with relevant service providers to help put strategies in place for the renter to (a) reduce clutter or squalor, and (b) address the renter’s hoarding behaviour.

Employees are to ensure they have adequate protection (gloves, foot protection, face mask, coverall, goggles, and handwashing items) when entering a property in which hoarding has been identified.

Employees are not to intervene without the cooperation of the renter unless the amount or nature of the accumulated goods poses an immediate and significant risk to the property or to neighbours, e.g. due to the risk of fire, emergency access, pests or noxious odours. YWCA has both a duty and a legal right to insist on urgent action to reduce such risks.

If the renter is unwilling or unable to cooperate in circumstances where their hoarding poses an unacceptable risk, YWCA may take legal action to obtain a compliance order or, as a last resort, to evict the renter.

1. **Process Steps**
2. If responding to a concern or complaint that suggests an inspection is appropriate, serve a “Notice to Enter” as per the relevant residential tenancy law. Notify the renter’s support worker if they have one.
3. On inspection, record the state of the property, including the rooms in which hoarding or squalor is apparent and the nature of the items hoarded (e.g. paper, food, clothing, electronics, animals, plastics, etc), check that smoke detectors are working (and have at least 1m clearance from hoarded goods) and utilities are connected, and update the client notes.
4. Assess the situation for the need for urgent referral. If the situation suggests
	1. possible child neglect or cruelty: notify child protection;
	2. neglect or concern about an older person: contact the relevant service e.g. HACC or ACAS;
	3. animal neglect or animal welfare concerns: contact RSPCA;
	4. significant fire risk: notify the local fire brigade;
	5. significant concern for the renter’s immediate wellbeing (e.g. psychotic behaviour, delirium, dementia, physical injuries or illness): contact the relevant health service (e.g. CAT team, ambulance).
5. Inform the renter of the outcome of the inspection, and if appropriate, discuss options for referral to support services.
6. If needed, agree to an immediate plan to ensure the property is safe, e.g. clear access/exit paths throughout the property (the BCA requires 1m clearance, sufficient for wheelchair access if ambulance service is required), removal of fire hazards (e.g. newspapers stacked on a heater), removal of noxious materials such as animal waste or rotting food, etc. NB: hoarders may agree to such conditions to ensure they don’t have to give up the majority of their hoard.
7. If the hoarding is unmanageable and poses a significant risk to the renter’s wellbeing, the neighbours’ amenity or the safety of the building, negotiate with the renter for referral to relevant support services to assist with a longer-term plan, and notify the local fire brigade that there’s a hoarder and the address.
8. Arrange for follow-up inspections (ensuring legal notice requirements are met) to monitor progress.
9. If the hoarding continues, other interventions have failed, and there are risks to the health or safety of other occupants of the building, to the amenity of neighbours or to the integrity of the building itself:
	1. Serve a ‘Breach of Duty Notice’ to require them to comply with a written list of minimum safety requirements, and serve a Notice to Enter for an inspection at the conclusion of the breach notice period;
	2. If the inspection indicates that the renter has not adequately complied with the requirements of the breach notice, apply for a tenancy tribunal hearing and an Order of Compliance;
	3. If the Tribunal’s Order of Compliance is not complied with and a sustainable and safe tenancy cannot be achieved, it may be necessary to issue a Notice To Vacate (for breach of the Compliance Order, or for successive breaches) and seek an Order of Possession.
10. Facing eviction, the renter may be willing to cooperate rather than lose everything. YWCA strives to sustain tenancies, and will make every effort to support the renter to address their hoarding behaviour. Eviction is a last resort, but may need to be carried out to ensure the safety of YWCA’s other renters, the property and its neighbours.
11. **Responsibilities**

YWCA’s National Housing Operations Manager has responsibility for ensuring that:

* this policy is implemented and its application monitored,
* the policy continues to comply with relevant legislation, and
* this policy is reviewed to evaluate its ongoing effectiveness.
1. **Appendices**

N/A

1. **Related Information**

Resources [VicHealth Hoarding and squalor webpage](https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/ageing-and-aged-care/wellbeing-and-participation/hoarding-and-squalor)

Legislation [Residential Tenancies Act 1997 (Vic)](http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/legis/vic/consol_act/rta1997207/)

Standards [Housing Registrar (Vic): Performance Standards](http://www.housingregistrar.vic.gov.au/files/assets/public/publications/performance-standards-and-evidence-guidelines/current-performance-standards.pdf)

Standards [NRSCH: Evidence Guidelines](http://www.nrsch.gov.au/publications/nrsch-operational-guidelines/evidence-guidelines)

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| Accountable Officer | Senior Manager, Community Housing |
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| Supersedes | [N/A: new policy] |

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