

# Professional organizers help clients keep it together

**Kit Waskom Pollard, For The Baltimore Sun**

The first time Lindsay Fitch-Alexander-Alexander heard about professional organizing, she thought, "Wouldn't that be the best thing ever?" Several years and many piles of paper later, the Catonsville pediatrician and mother of two hired Mary Cate Claudias, owner of Charm City Organizers, to help her manage the paper flow.

"I have young kids in school with papers coming in and had a desk and computer area drowning in a sea of paper," she says.

Claudias initially helped her sift through her home office area, creating systems that would allow her and her family to stay organized over time. Fitch-Alexander then asked Claudias to move on to other areas of the home.

"We've done kid study space organizing, the kitchen, the basement playroom and sewing area, and a couple rounds of office organizing," says Fitch-Alexander, explaining that now that she has Claudias as a partner — and a good system in place — her space is tidy and she, her husband and kids are able to keep it fairly well organized on their own.

Fitch-Alexander is not alone in her desire to keep everything in place. "Getting organized" is the second most popular New Year's resolution for 2014 — beat out only by "lose weight," according to the University of Scranton's Journal of Clinical Psychology,

But according to the same poll, only 8 percent of people who make New Year's resolutions keep them. Like dropping pounds, getting organized is easier to talk about than to accomplish.

[Katherine Trezise](#) says many of her clients tried to organize on their own for years before calling her.

"They purchase organizing books," says [Trezise, owner of Absolutely Organized in Cockeysville](#). "Some of their libraries rival mine! But it doesn't really help. They don't know where to start, so they don't start."

Experts say people have organization problems for a variety of reasons. Some, like those featured on the television show "Hoarders," grapple with chronic disorganization because of underlying psychological problems. Much more commonly, people have simply fallen into bad habits over time or because of a new life situation, like a recent move or a new baby.

For those with "situational" reasons, identifying the need and deciding to hire a professional organizer can be an obvious decision. But those who have bad habits may have a harder time recognizing that it's time to hire professional help.

"If projects continue to be put off because they seem daunting or overwhelming," consider hiring a professional organizer, says Claudias, noting that many of her clients are "Normal Joes who call us because their basement is their nemesis."

The process of working with a professional is customized according to client needs — it can range from over-the-phone consultations to complete home overhauls with extensive follow-up. Typically, the process starts with an initial consultation and needs assessment, during which the organizer asks a lot of questions about goals and how the space is used.

After the initial consultation, the next step is to sort and purge. For many, this is where the real value of hiring a professional shines. "It's very difficult to make decisions about things, particularly when everything has a story behind it or is unique," says Trezise. Having an objective outsider participate can be helpful.

After de-cluttering and purging, organizers help clients set up systems to stay organized over time. "Maintenance is by far the most important step," says Claudias. "Anybody can come in and clean your space, but really understanding the skill of organizing is the important thing."

Professional organizers stress the importance of adopting strategies that fit your current life instead of trying to change your life to fit a strategy. "Unless it matches your lifestyle, you're not going to keep up with it," says Claudias.

After moving into a new house and starting a full-time job, Danelle Buchman of Clarksville found herself with a cluttered basement filled with unpacked boxes.

Two six-hour sessions with Jill Prevatt, owner of Arrange Professional Organizing, transformed the space into an organized room, including a living area, small office and well-organized overflow kitchen storage.

Buchman says she's still using the lessons she learned to keep the space tidy, including Prevatt's system of storing similar objects together for ease of access. "We continue to use the process," she says. "A year later, we're still using the 'like with like' advice."

Ultimately, organizers promise that taking the time to get organized, either on your own or with professional help, is worth it. It saves time (no more searching for the keys) and money (no more late fees for lost bills). But most important, they say, being organized leads to better relationships and overall well-being.

Because the process varies widely from client to client, professional organizers' fees are sometimes hard to pin down. Claudias says depending on client needs, she typically charges about \$65 to \$85 per hour. Prevatt says an eight-hour project using her services typically costs between \$500 and \$700.

"It's hard to put a number on it," says Prevatt, who is also director of marketing for the Baltimore chapter of the National Association of Professional Organizers. "The amount of clutter in your home can be directly related to stress. You feel guilty when you haven't had time to clean up."

"Getting organized shows you have respect for the people who are with you," says Trezise. "It's a very kind thing to do. And it's pleasing to see things organized. But the biggest thing organizing does is free you to be able to focus on being with the people and doing the activities most important to you."

For Fitch-Alexander, staying organized "feels so wonderful. It's hard to overstate the emotional gratification there is. Your house looks nice, and it's much more pleasant to live in. The emotional satisfaction and quality of life payoff is huge."

### **Get it together**

Here's a primer with advice from the experts on how to get organized in 2014:

#### **Families**

Staying organized with kids in the house sometimes feels like an impossible task. These strategies will help parents — and kids — tame their messes.

**Contain chaos.** Children often spread their gear all over the house. To combat the sprawl, professional organizers recommend creating a "launch pad" space near your home's busiest entrance. This could include hooks for hanging bookbags and jackets, a table with a basket for keys, and large baskets for purses and other items.

**Purge.** Kids outgrow toys and books, so organizers recommend "purging" play areas on a regular basis. Save what kids still use, donate anything in good shape, and toss what's been destroyed.

**Get kids involved.** "The skill of organizing is a basic life skill," says Charm City Organizers' Mary Cate Claudias. "If part of the play process is to clean up afterwards, the kids won't resent it. They'll pick it up as a life skill."

**Keep a sample.** Children bring home mountains of papers and artwork. Parents should occasionally sort and purge — without guilt. "You don't have to keep the entire body of work," says Absolutely Organized's Katherine Trezise. "Just save a few tests or their favorite artwork from the year." If that's too emotionally difficult, consider photography, advises Trezise. "You can always take a picture, particularly with artwork. Have the child hold it and put the pictures in an album."

#### **Working from home**

For students or adults who blend their living space with work and study areas, professional organizers recommend strategies that help clearly define work versus personal space, even in small, multipurpose rooms.

**Designated space.** When Jill Prevatt of Arrange Professional Organizing helped Danelle Buchman organize her Clarksville basement, office space was on their list of goals. Prevatt helped her find room for a desk, creating a dedicated area for work and administrative tasks.

**Keep it close.** Keeping necessary papers and tools where they will be used cuts down on whole-house clutter and saves time. "Set up things where you use them," says Prevatt. "If you work in your kitchen and have an empty drawer, store office supplies instead of dish towels."

**Tools.** The right set of tools can make staying organized easier, especially in multi-use spaces (for example, the kitchen table that becomes a desk). "Get a rolling file cabinet," suggests Prevatt. "If you don't have space for that, set up a quick access file." She also recommends pretty boxes and portable files, which are readily available at stores like Target and the Container Store.

### **Where to donate**

Katherine Trezise of [Absolutely Organized](#) recommends donating to a range of organizations, from hospitals to women's shelters. Here are a few:

**Clothing.** In addition to Goodwill, well-kept clothes may find a good home at consignment shops like Vogue Revisited in Hampden. Also consider donating business clothes to organizations like Paul's Place, a soup kitchen in Baltimore that houses a free clothing store to outfit people for job interviews.

**Furniture and household items.** Antique and consignment shops are a good fit for many items of good quality and in good shape. The Baltimore area has dozens, from the Clearing House in Timonium to Avenue Antiques in Hampden.

**Books.** The Book Thing in Charles Village allows shoppers to take home books for free, replenishing their stock via donations.

**Kids' stuff.** Children's-oriented consignment shops, such as Tried But True in Cockeysville and the Lily Pad near Towson, are great options for gently worn children's clothes, furniture and gear.

### **Contest for clutter**

To help motivate would-be organizers during January, the Greater Baltimore Chapter of the National Association of Professional Organizers is running a contest searching for Baltimore's most cluttered spaces.

The "B'more Organized 2014 Photo Contest" will award a variety of prizes, including de-cluttering and organizing sessions with NAPO members, Ikea gift cards and additional organizing tools.

The contest's goal, says Jill Prevatt, owner of Arrange Professional Organizing and Director of Marketing for NAPO-Baltimore, is to "empower people to regain control over their time, their inboxes, and in general." For more information about the contest and to enter, visit [napobaltimore.org](http://napobaltimore.org).