



COMMUNITIES » City of Buffalo



Rashad Younger of AmeriCorps helps shovel the driveway at the Emerson Place home of Margaret Gaines, who requested help using the city's 311 system.
Derek Gee / Buffalo News

Shovelers tackle tough task

Growing number of snowbound city residents are getting help digging out from steadily expanding brigade of volunteers

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Take East Side resident Mary Bonner, who has had two knee surgeries, suffers from back problems and has carpal tunnel syndrome.

Bonner is among a growing number of people who are getting emergency shoveling help from the city, which has been steadily expanding its shoveling brigades.

The dig-out teams include Ameri- Corps participants, high school volunteers and even prison parolees.

Since the flakes started flying late last year, crews have responded to more than 500 requests for service from people in neighborhoods throughout the city.

“When you’re on a fixed income, it’s really wonderful to have this kind of service,” Bonner said. “I can’t tell how much I appreciate it.”

The city has been using several programs to help residents cope with shoveling duties.

The largest is a partnership with AmeriCorps and the Belle Community Center on Maryland Street. Now in its third year, the city has a contract with the organizations to provide shoveling.

Teams of four or more people hit the streets with shovels and salt that the city provides. So far, nearly 400 shoveling missions have been performed in the past couple of months. By comparison, the program provid-

ed fewer than 330 service calls for the entire winter a year earlier.

When storms dump significant amounts of snow on the city and the AmeriCorps crews are backed up, the city also receives help from a nonprofit group that provides job opportunities for prison parolees. The city signed a contract last summer with the Center for Employment Opportunities to perform various neighborhood tasks, including mowing lawns and boarding up empty homes. The program does not accept convicted sex offenders or arsonists, and crews are supervised.

The city also makes limited use of “quick response teams” made up of city employees to help with urgent shoveling requests in neighborhoods — often around intersections.

Calls or e-mails from people requesting shoveling assistance are screened by Buffalo’s Citizens Services unit, the same division that operates Buffalo’s 311 Call and Resolution Center. Individuals must be at least age 62 or have medical conditions that prevent them from shoveling. Screeners chat with people and get contact information in hopes of weeding out those who are capable of shoveling but are trying to finagle free services.

Teams are deployed when screeners are confident that the candidates have a pressing need for shoveling, such as a looming doctor's appointment or a scheduled delivery of oxygen.

Do city officials suspect some scammers have slipped through the informal screening process?

"I won't say it hasn't happened," said Citizens Services Director Oswaldo Mestre Jr. "But people in Buffalo are pretty good about this."

Still, there are a handful of people known in the 311 call center as "frequent fliers." Shoveling help is supposed to be confined to urgent situations that occur on weekdays. A handful tend to over-rely on volunteer shovelers, officials said.

"You get a dusting of snow, and some people call on a regular basis—daily," said Burt M. Mirti, coordinator of Buffalo's Clean Cities initiative. "You go out there, and there's really nothing to shovel."

Meanwhile, some good Samaritan students from Bishop Timon-St. Jude and South Park high schools are participating in a shoveling program that focuses on helping low-income senior citizens in South Buffalo. About a dozen students are involved in a program that has been christened S. O. S. — Service by Outstanding Students. Another two-dozen students are on standby to assist during big storms.

The high school crews have visited about 20 homes — some several times since November. The program is sponsored by the Common Council and works closely with WNY Ameri- Corps VISTA.

Jackson Brown, a 15-year-old sophomore at Bishop Timon- St. Jude, enrolled in the program last year to fulfill a community service requirement at his school. He continued as a volunteer even after fulfilling his hours.

"I felt like I was really helping someone," he said.

Sharon Wilbur, a resident of South Buffalo's First Ward, is on oxygen and uses a wheelchair. She said the CitiCorps program has helped to ease a major fear.

"When people can't get out and shovel, they get worried," she said. "If someone gets hurt, it's your fault."

The volunteer shovelers have had a contagious effect in some instances, said CitiCorps Program Manager Nicholas Smith.

"Some neighbors have seen our volunteers out there, and they've offered to help out," Smith said.

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Comments