311 Complaints and Fines Fail to Solve Usual City Winter Woe —Too Many Snow-Packed Sidewalks

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From the seat of his wheelchair, Rick Guardino has crowd surfed at Lollapalooza, cheered on his Cubs at Wrigley Field and closed down attacking lanes for his wheelchair rugby team, the Bears.

“I’m so independent, I live on my own, I do everything on my own,” Guardino said. “My mom raised an independent man that has cerebral palsy. I think the reason I am in this chair is because I’m strong enough to handle it. Nothing gets me down.”

But what makes the 45-year-old Lakeview resident worry for his safety are the curbs and sidewalks that go unshoveled after a winter storm. He has toppled over backwards trying to scale ice-packed curbs with his wheelchair and been forced into the street with car traffic to bypass snowed-covered sidewalks.
“It’s kind of scary,” Guardino said. “But I’m used to it. I’ve been doing it pretty much my whole life. I’ve been hit a couple times. There was one time where someone hit me on Grand (Avenue) and didn’t even bother to look if I was OK.”

For Guardino and many others, help may be on the way if the Chicago City Council approves a pilot program to plow some city sidewalks. Last summer, the City Council commissioned a group to study options for a pilot program. It is scheduled to report back in the spring with a plan for potential approval. If all goes smoothly, snow plowing could begin as soon as next winter.

For now, the responsibility for clearing sidewalk snow falls on property owners. But critics say that it often fails to work because it relies on people who may be unwilling or unable to do the job.

Details of the pilot program, including the cost, are unknown, but the pilot aims to focus on clearing sidewalks in areas with public transit, high populations of people who are elderly or disabled, and areas that have typically been starved of resources. Hundreds of thousands of Chicagoans — young parents with strollers, the elderly, disabled people — can be stuck at home if their sidewalks are not shoveled, according to city officials.

If enacted, Chicago would join other cities that provide sidewalk snow clearance where residents enjoy the service, but it doesn’t come cheap. On the East Coast, Syracuse, New York, plows some of its sidewalks, while Toronto clears all of its sidewalks for a small fraction of what Chicago spends, for instance, on police overtime each year.

“Frankly, this is incredibly bread-and-butter government service in so many ways,” said Michael Podgers, a policy lead at Better Streets Chicago, a transit advocacy group supporting the plan.

“For a lot of people, it’s going to be a wonderful benefit that they won’t have to get up in the morning and shovel their sidewalks again.”

‘My mom fell, broke her arm and needed stitches’

In the past five years, Chicagoans have made more than 22,000 complaints to 311 for unshoveled sidewalks, city records show.

These complaints describe negligent landlords failing to clean up their walkways,
snow and ice accumulations on sidewalks next to empty lots as well as slip-and-fall hazards for the elderly.

“I’m a disabled veteran with hip problems,” a Lakeview resident reported in November 2019. “I walk a large service dog and I have already slipped on this street three times since the last snowfall.”

“This owner did not clear their sidewalk or ice and snow,” a Little Village resident wrote in January 2022. “My mom fell, broke her arm and needed stitches. They need to be fined.”

“PERSON IN WHEELCHAIR CAN NOT SHOVEL AND SNOW IS SO BAD THAT HE IS BLOCKED IN AND CAN NOT LEAVE HIS HOUSE,” an Englewood resident wrote in February 2021.

Residents are supposed to call 311 to get the city to address the unshoveled sidewalks but that often fails to work.

City employees are almost just as likely to leave a flier at the offending property reminding the landowner — if one is around— to shovel the sidewalk as they were to report that the offender was in “compliance” and the snow was removed, which can occur several days after the complaint is made.

While not singling out sidewalk shoveling, City Inspector General Deborah Witzburg took aim at the “complaint-based” approach to providing services in an advisory opinion issued earlier this year. She called the city’s ask-and-you-may-receive approach a “reactive strategy that can increase long-term costs, prevent the optimal provision of public services and neglect people and communities less likely to register complaints.”

“By relying on complaints to allocate resources, the city delivers less comprehensive services to fewer Chicagoans,” Witzburg wrote.

To punish offenders, Chicago issued more than 3,200 tickets for unshoveled sidewalks in the past decade, totaling about $1 million. City data shows that only a small portion of these tickets were issued between the time a 311 complaint for unshoveled snow was opened and closed, suggesting the tickets were issued for reasons other than the 311 complaints.

According to city records, the biggest offender is a resident of south suburban
New Lenox, who bought a lot in the Englewood neighborhood for $12,500 from the city six years ago. The lot was developed into a tire store, now defunct, and the city has fined the landowner nearly $20,000 for failing to keep the sidewalk clear of snow. He could not be reached for comment.

A shot by a city worker shows the snow-packed sidewalk in front of a now defunct tire store in the Englewood neighborhood that has racked up more snow-related tickets than any other offender. (Credit: City of Chicago)

Altogether, these fines are a pittance in the City of Chicago’s $16.7 billion annual budget, and the tickets do not ensure that the snow is removed.

Laura Saltzman, a senior policy analyst with disability rights group Access Living, put the problem bluntly.

“Fines don’t shovel sidewalks,” Saltzman said.

**As Chicago ponders plan, Canadians enjoy clear sidewalks**

As Chicago considers its own response to city-funded sidewalk snow clearance, they may look to Toronto for inspiration.
Last year, the home of Drake and the Maple Leafs spent the equivalent of $26.5 million — or about 11% of what Chicago police spent on overtime in 2023 — to plow about 4,900 miles of sidewalk.

“We’ve been clearing the snow off of sidewalks for years,” said Vincent Sferrazza, director of operations and maintenance, transportation services for the City of Toronto. “Once you start it, you’re never going to lose it.”

Sferrazza said the program started in 1998 after the Canadian government incorporated many of the city’s suburbs into the Toronto city limits, boosting the city’s population from 600,000 to 2.4 million. Right now, about 3 million people live in Toronto, making it the fourth largest city in North America — just above Chicago.

Toronto deploys sidewalk plows after about 2 centimeters of snow falls, Sferrazza said. There are two crews that do the work: a crew of contractors who sweep through the formerly suburban portions of the city with sidewalk-sized plows and a crew of City of Toronto employees who use smaller equipment to fit the tinier walkways of old Toronto. It takes about 12 hours to finish one round of clearance with about 80% of the work being completed by the contractors.

Sferrazza warned that the process isn’t perfect. Sidewalks rarely get as clear as a salted street, as passing cars activate the salt in cold temperatures, and occasionally, crews damage personal property.

“You’re going to hit somebody’s fence,” he said. “I don’t care how good of a driver you are. I don’t care how experienced you are. Remember, you are doing these operations at 3 a.m., you can’t see a thing, it’s your first round and all you see is white.”

Chicago is not an exact equivalent to Toronto. Chicago has more poverty than Toronto, and Toronto gets more snow than Chicago. But transit advocates say that the cities have comparable density, population and sidewalk mileage.

Stateside, Chicago could take some pointers from Syracuse, New York. The upstate college town has provided plowing for a portion of its sidewalks intermittently since 2019.

Corey Driscoll Dunham, the chief operations officer for the Syracuse mayor’s
office, said they plow 156 miles of sidewalk, with a budgeted cost of $322,000. The city uses a contractor — the only one to submit a bid for the work — after about 3 inches of snow accumulates, and the process of clearing the sidewalks takes six to eight hours.

Syracuse has assessed snow-clearance fees on homes and businesses to pay for the program, which does not include salting. Annual fees will top out at $100 for residential properties and $300 for businesses, and they fund the city’s sidewalk budget, which also pays for sidewalk repair.

Cherlnell Lane, who lives in the Washington Park neighborhood, says that whatever Chicago has to pay to keep the sidewalks clear will be worth it.
blocks to her local library branch. Snow accumulates next door on the sidewalk in front of a city-owned lot that makes it impassable.

“I believe that politicians in office should be looking after their constituents,” said Lane, 41. “They should be looking after all of us, not just some of us. Just like we find the money for everything else, like flowers downtown, we should be able to get things together to make this program happen.”