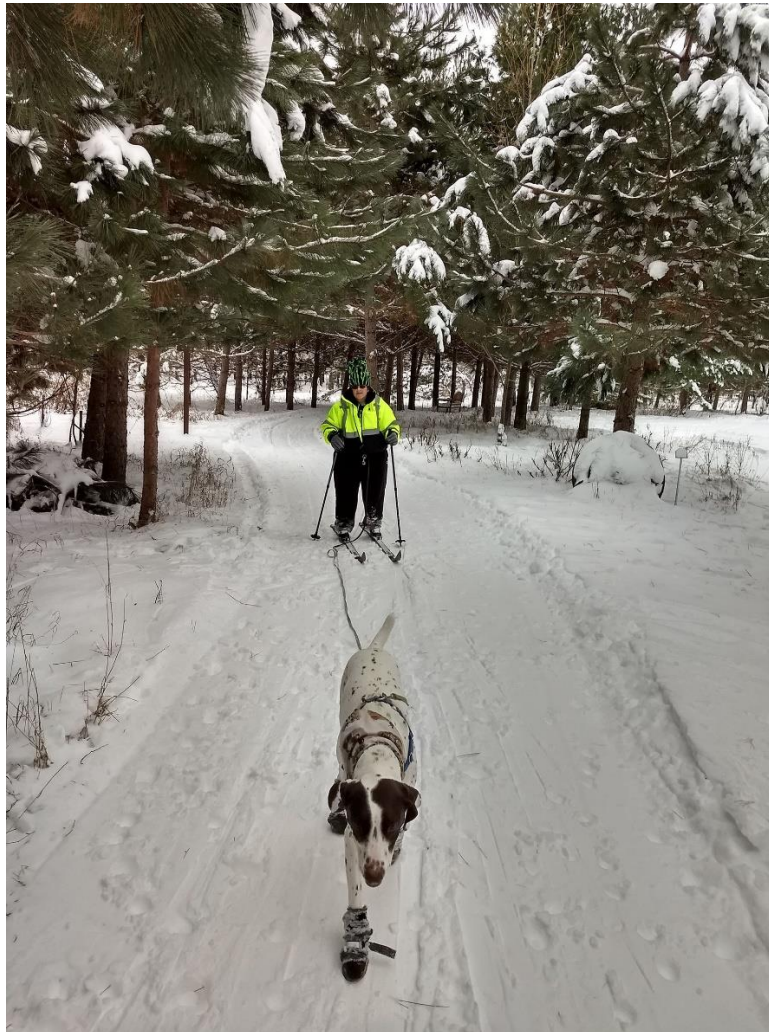


Winter Accessibility Issues

By [Bonnie Bartos](#) posted 02-28-2019 10:23



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An important winter accessibility issue was brought to my attention as I watched the news last night. Minneapolis Channel 9 News featured a piece about access to workplaces and merchant services for individuals with disabilities. How many people clean their sidewalks, walkways, and access areas enough to provide appropriate access for individuals using wheelchairs, scooters, or walkers? The standard snow-blower single path clearance is too narrow for wheelchairs, wide walkers, or scooters. A three-foot wide, or greater, snow-free space provides enough room for the individual to turn around if needed.

Inadequate clearance of snow from the curb cut areas also interferes with wheelchair, walker, and scooter access. Uneven surfaces that freeze during severely cold weather can create ruts on the walkway and make it more difficult to move around. One person interviewed showed how hard it was to move across a snow or slush covered space in a motorized wheelchair. The wheels kept spinning around and she was unable to get through the slushy spots.

Another key factor to consider is the risk of frostbite for people with reduced sensation due to neuropathy, prior injury, or secondary to a stroke. It may be more difficult for them to tell just how cold it is outside. The risk increases if they get stuck in the snow or slush in sub-zero temperatures. Working from home may not be an option for some people with disabilities.

Following periods of heavy snowfall, removal of the snow and figuring out where to put all of it is quite a task. Some public sidewalks and street surfaces have huge piles of snow due to recurrent blizzards and excess snow. Even though most city ordinances require clearance of snow from sidewalks, some have added measurements help merchants and residents understand the requirement. The city ordinance where I live in Wadena, MN states, "A minimum path of 36 inches must be shoveled or cleared for sidewalks".

Minneapolis has their snow removal guidelines on short video showing shoveling, salting, sanding processes. The video mentioned that sidewalks need to be cleared for access by people of all abilities – even those in wheelchairs. St. Paul, Minnesota's guidelines state that the whole sidewalk must be cleared down to the bare pavement surface. This regulation also specifies that snow must be piled on yards or boulevards, though cannot be dumped in alleyways or streets. In years such as this with excessive snowfall, the snowbanks have been piled high and have blocked some street and alley access because there's nowhere else to place it at this time.

St. Paul's Sidewalk Snow Shoveling Video showed individuals with walkers and wheelchairs having difficulty navigating an un-shoveled sidewalk. It also featured able-bodied individuals struggling to walk on the snowy surfaces. These scenes were repeated with people moving down the cleared surfaces with ease following snow removal. Their video was not closed-captioned.

I love the snow and do not mind navigating through snowfall on foot, skis, snowshoes, or in a vehicle. However, I am thankful that this newscast made me think of and respect the needs of those using wheelchairs, walkers, scooters, or parents with small children in strollers. If you live and work in an area subject to the winter weather check your local snow removal regulations so everyone can properly access walkways.

Photo Credit: Lora Foust's photo of B. Bartos skiing with her Service Dog in February 2019.

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