

## Helping our Senior Neighbors with Snow Removal

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The seemingly endless series of snowstorms since the first of the year has trapped many seniors and disabled persons in their homes for long periods. With their sidewalks, driveways and entryways clogged, seniors have been unable to obtain services like Meals on Wheels and home health care for extended periods. Hardest hit have been seniors living in their own homes in the suburbs and rural areas, while residents of senior buildings that had snow removal services fared much better.

Fortunately for some, Serve Rhode Island, our state's primary volunteer agency, recruited, screened and deployed 77 volunteers who have completed 236 snow removal requests. They assisted 162 elderly and disabled residents of Rhode Island as of February 17<sup>th</sup>. A good number were helped 3 or 4 times during these storms. Bernie Beaudreau, Serve Rhode Island's Executive Director, who also wielded a snow shovel, reported that "the oldest resident we served was age 100. She said, "I usually go out and shovel myself but this time the snow is too heavy. "

Talking to those seniors, Beaudreau found that many of them would have been willing to pay a modest amount for someone to shovel them out, but didn't know where to find that help. Snowstorms create risks for seniors in several ways: lack of home health care can cause deterioration and require hospitalization; frail seniors who try to "do it themselves" can be at risk for heart attacks and injuries from falls, and being homebound can cause seniors to become depressed.

This situation points to the clear need for a robust elder services program that can help link homebound and isolated seniors and disabled adults with volunteer or paid providers of basic chores, such as snow shoveling, clearing debris after storms, and deliveries of food during and after emergencies. Such a program would require the development of a large pool of pre-screened persons that could be mobilized on short notice---no small task.

Rhode Island's senior population is currently estimated to be in excess of 160,000 and expected to reach 198,000 by 2020. Much of the growth in the senior population in recent years has been in the suburbs, a trend that's expected to continue. Those are the areas where seniors are most at risk for being "snowed in." We certainly know that severe winter storms are a part of our landscape. As a community we need to make the investment it would take to develop the response needed to protect our seniors. As teenagers, my brothers and I used to make a few extra dollars shoveling out elderly neighbors after a snowstorm. In our small and somewhat isolated neighborhood, we knew most of our elderly neighbors. Two of our customers were very elderly sisters who were clearly poor, and after a while we just did their driveway and walk for free. I believe there are many Rhode Islanders who would do the same for others.