

Growing community means growing need for volunteer snow shovellers: Neighbourhood Network



By Brock Weir

As communities grow and populations age, there are many challenges that are clear for all to see. But there are still some challenges that remain hidden if you haven't had to walk the walk.

This winter, however, you hardly have to look past the end of your driveway.

Many seniors living in their homes simply aren't able to physically shovel the snow on their driveways or clear pathways in and out of their house, and this is where Neighbourhood Network, the Aurora-based organization that links community volunteers with individuals in need, steps in.

But the organization can only go so far without your help.

Neighbourhood Network is at the height of its annual Winter Snow Removal Campaign, a program which links seniors and residents living with physical challenges to nearby volunteers who are ready to lend a hand, pick up a shovel, and clear pathways in and out of homes for residents and caregivers.

With the growth this community is experiencing, however, the need is more acute now than ever before and Neighbourhood Network is encouraging volunteers to sign up to battle the snow.

"We know that our demographics and populations are continuing to age and that brings with it many challenges, one of which is we have seniors in our community who are stuck in their homes in the winter," says Neighbourhood Network's Erin Cerenzia. "As the population continues to age, the need for more volunteers to sign up for winter snow removal continues to increase. From a volunteer perspective, we really encourage anyone as long as you can lift a shovel, whether you're a young family who wants to get out and volunteer together, mom, dad and the kids, whether you're an adult, it really doesn't matter to sign up."

The concept is simple: Neighbourhood Network asks for any and all willing volunteers and they are matched with someone in their area ideally no more than a 10 minute walking distance from their homes, unless you're willing to drive that needs a helping hand.

"The idea is to get to know your neighbours and help people who are right there in your community, close by," says Ms. Cerenzia. As far as eligible seniors and persons with disabilities, there is more specific criteria.

The program is geared specifically towards low-income seniors who wouldn't otherwise have the means to hire someone to clear their snow. If you're just looking for someone to come by and clear your windrow, for instance, this program is not for you. While the program is available to persons with disabilities, proof that you're not physically able to remove your snow will need to be provided.

"It is always important for everyone to understand that this is a volunteer-driven program," says Ms. Cerenzia. "We will take your application, put you through a screening process and then as soon as we have a volunteer who is able to come by and provide the clearing services for you and we can't guarantee that we will we will send them over to you."

"The volunteer is not required to clear the whole driveway," she adds, noting this is a common misconception when it comes to the

winter snow removal program. ?It is really to give that senior or person with a disability access to get in and out of their house, or have a caregiver come in and out of the house, clearing a pathway that is safe for them to walk, clearing the Town's sidewalks, and that really annoying windrow that the snow plow leaves at the end of the driveway.

?We tell our clients who are receivers of the snow clearing service, that the volunteer has 24 hours to come to your house once the snow storm has ended. We will never make you go out as a storm is going on. It is also 10 centimetres of snow or more. It has to be a significant amount of snow fall that really warrants someone coming out to shovel. It's not as onerous as clearing your driveway; it is much easier than you think it will be.?

It is also a simple way for students to collect the community service hours they need to graduate high school.

?Depending on the type of winter we have, we have actually had students complete more than their 40 hours in one winter season. If there is a lot of snow, there's a lot of shovelling to be done. The concept of Neighbourhood Network really stems from helping your neighbours and understanding who are those people in our community that are in need of assistance? For students when they are working on their 40 hours, they always see it as. ?This is something hard that I have to do,' but when you can make that personal connection to your neighbour, maybe someone who lives on your street that you've grown up with, I think that has a really positive impact on everyone all around. Not only will you get a lot of hours if you volunteer as a student, but hopefully you will make a life-long connection with a neighbour in your community who is in need.?

For more information on how to sign up for Neighbourhood Network's Winter Snow Removal program as a client or as a volunteer, visit neighbourhoodnetwork.org or call 905-726-3737. Recipients must be residents of Aurora, King, Newmarket, East Gwillimbury or Georgina, 65 years of age or older (low-income seniors who receive a Seniors Tax Credit are given priority). Residents with a disability documented by ODSP are also eligible. There must be no able-bodied adults living at the address in question.