Snow and Ice Removal

The organization in charge of a multifamily housing complex has the responsibility to clear parking lots, roadways, and sidewalks throughout the property of snow and ice, providing a safe, passable area for residents and visitors.

However, some areas and responsibilities can often be overlooked, including rooftops—which can be damaged due to heavy snow—and whether it is better to handle snow removal in-house or through a third-party vendor.



In this resource, we will detail best practices and more to prepare you for the winter months, including ways to improve the efficiency and safety of your employees and residents, and shield your agency from potential liability.

Snow and Ice Removal—Best Practices

When removing snow and ice, consider the following:

- Pretreat walking surfaces and parking lots with ice melt to reduce slippery areas and to save time when shoveling.
- The longer snow sits on a surface, the more difficult it is to shovel. Attempt to clear snow as soon as possible.
- Consider the use of licensed and insured contractors—in addition to your employees—to improve your snow removal efficiency.

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- Motorized equipment, such as snowblowers, power shovels, plows, and tractors save time and reduce strain. Ensure that anyone using this equipment has been adequately trained and uses proper personal protective equipment.
- Keep records of ice melt usage and actions taken during the snow removal process.

Preventing Injuries



Removing snow, either using motorized equipment or basic shoveling operations, can be a hazardous process that puts physical strain on employees and increases risk for residents. Each year, approximately 11,500 people in the United States are treated in emergency rooms for snow shoveling injuries.

Consider the following tips to prevent injuries:

- Shovel areas periodically throughout the day, as more frequent sessions of shoveling smaller amounts of snow will reduce strain on the body.
- Use lightweight and ergonomically designed shovels to prevent back and lifting injuries. For areas and situations where snowfall is heavy, encourage the use of snowblowers or plow equipment.
- Employees should dress in layers, hydrate regularly, and take frequent breaks during removal activities to reduce exertion.
- Encourage employees to inspect equipment before any use and report any deficiencies immediately to prevent injury to themselves or others.
- Post warning signs that include the risk of slips, trips, and falls, and have residents wait until areas are clear of snow before walking.
- In instances where residents are responsible for snow and ice removal, whether it be the entrance area into their units or individual driveways, educate them on the proper shoveling techniques to reduce the potential for injury.

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Prepare Early



The best way to address snow and ice removal concerns is to plan before the winter season. Identifying the needs of your properties, as well as the capabilities of equipment and personnel, may save considerable time and prevent injuries during periods of heavy snowfall.

Follow these tips to prepare:

- Create and update snow and ice removal guidelines for your agency. Make sure employees are aware of expectations and responsibilities during a winter storm.
- Identify through written lease agreements any areas where residents are responsible for snow and ice removal.
- Maintain a minimum inventory of supplies throughout the winter, including shovels, ice melt, snowblowers, and other snow and ice removal tools.
- Ensure there is an adequate fuel supply for power equipment. Store fuel safely outdoors or in an approved flammable liquids cabinet.
- Train applicable employees for snow and ice removal, including the equipment used for removal and documentation requirements.
- Identify areas to store snow. Consider the snowmelt and associated runoff from this area.

In-House versus Contracted Services

Plow trucks make quick work of clearing roadways and can spread salt or other material on the road to ensure safe travel. When performing snow/ice removal in house, property owners should:

- Maintain a log for all areas where snow and ice removal activities have occurred.
- Have written guidelines which define the areas to be plowed, shoveled, or blown, as well as timeline expectations. For example, snow removal is typically required within 24 hours of snowfall. However, specific timeframes can vary depending on your location, so it's best to check with your local ordinances to understand the requirements for your area.
- Provide tenants with 24/7 contact information for the appropriate individuals to contact for snow and ice removal needs.
- Have a supply of sand and/or salt for emergency situations available.
- Follow established procedures for documenting and investigating all snow and ice related accidents.

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When contracting for snow and ice removal, property owners should have a formal risk transfer program in place, which includes a written contract developed by legal counsel. The written contract should include items, provisions, and requirements such as the following:

- A specific term (e.g. Oct. 1 through May 1). Do not refer generally to a seasonal term.
- Documentation stating that the contractor is an independent contractor and is responsible for ensuring that the work is performed in a safe and responsible manner.
- Specified areas to be plowed, shoveled, salted, sanded, and blown. Share schematics and pictures with the contractor.
- Details of the snow removal services that are to be performed, where they are to be performed, and when.
- Requiring a snow and ice removal log be kept by the contractor and their subcontractors. Logs should identify the location, date, and time for all snow and ice removal activities.
- Contractor's written approval that they will be responsible for any property damage or personal injury caused by the contractor's negligence.
- Telephone availability 24/7 to address problems that may arise during the term, such as changes in conditions due to melting snow and ice forming.
- The contractor must promptly report any property defects that are identified.
- A valid hold harmless, defense, and indemnification provision.
- The contractor must name the property owner as an additional insured on their general liability and commercial motor vehicle insurance policies for both ongoing operations and completed operations on a primary and non-contributory basis.
- Subcontractors hired by the snow removal contractor must use contracts with the same requirement as you require of the snow removal contractor.



Snow Removal from Roofs

Removing snow from the surface of your property's rooftops is an important consideration to preserve structural integrity especially in regions with large snowfall totals and consistent below-freezing temperatures. The amount of snow and ice a roof can safely support varies based on factors such as the roof's age and condition. As a general guideline, if more than eight inches of heavy snow has accumulated, it should be removed to prevent potential damage. While this is an important process, there is considerable risk involved with removing snow, protecting personnel, and maintaining your property's condition.

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What To Consider First

Property managers should plan to reduce safety risks for personnel ahead of severe winter weather. Since every property, roof style, and geographic area is different, it is best to create a plan.

Be sure to consider the following:

- Can snow be removed without accessing the roof?
- What hazards exist on the roof (e.g., skylights, chimneys, elevation changes, edges)?
- What type of fall protection or personal protective equipment should be used by, and what level of training should be required of employees?
- What are the maximum load limits for the roof? Will the additional snow load combined with the increase in weight from equipment and personnel exceed these limits?

Removing Snow from Pitched Roofs

It's best to remove snow without going onto the roof surface, particularly for pitched roof areas. Roof rakes and draglines can clear snow and ice from these surfaces. The following precautions should be taken:

- When using a roof rake, leave two to three inches on the surface. Attempting to scrape shingles clear of snow completely may damage the surface and pose the threat of future leaks.
- Refrain from using a roof rake or shovel while positioned on a ladder to avoid losing balance.
- Ensure that crews and residents are not in the path of falling objects. Create a safety zone that prohibits anyone from standing too close.



Removing Snow from Flat Roofs

For buildings with flat roofs, it may be necessary for personnel to access the roof to remove snow. One of the primary concerns with this method is the potential fall risk. The following precautions should be taken:

- Avoid snow removal during heavy snowfall or high winds.
- Wear the proper gear, including non-slip boots, and clothing suitable for cold weather.

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- Use lightweight plastic or aluminum shovels to reduce the risk of damaging the roof surface.
- Ensure drains are clear of snow and ice to prevent water backup which can result in building damage.
- If snow accumulation is substantial or access is difficult, consider hiring a professional snow removal service.

Preventing Roof and Equipment Damage



For all snow removal strategies, use caution to prevent damage on the roof surface and roof-mounted components. Failure to protect the roof surface may result in future costly water leaks and decreased life expectancy for the roof structure.

- Use only plastic shovels and snowblowers with rubber or plastic blades to prevent damage to surfaces.
- Determine the location of roof drains, vent pipes, skylights, and roof-mounted equipment to prevent damage to these components during snow removal.
- Avoid making piles or unevenly cleaning the roof surface, as this can place excess weight on specific areas and exceed load limits.
- Ice dams can result from an improperly ventilated attic space and cause significant water leaks in the roof. Address ice damming as soon as possible using a nylon stocking filled with calcium chloride ice melt to create a water channel for drainage.
- Inspect roofs frequently during the winter season to ensure that no damage or uneven leading has occurred.

Interested in working with HAI Group to manage your agency's risk?

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