

Chicago shut down by blizzard

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The blizzard that hit Chicago, Illinois February 1 brought most activity in the city to a halt for several days. Fierce winds over 60 miles per hour, bitterly cold temperatures, and more than 20 inches of snow swept in, forcing road closures, flight cancellations, and widespread power outages. At least 18 Chicago-area deaths have been attributed to the severe weather.

The storm system stretched 2,000 miles across a third of the country. The worst for Chicago in 40 years, the storm rivaled the 1967 blizzard that shut down the city, and is recorded as the third largest storm the city has seen.

O'Hare airport recorded 20.2 total inches of snow and Midway airport 20.9 inches. The Chicago Department of Aviation (CDA) said that 2,200 flights had been canceled at O'Hare and 400 canceled at Midway on Wednesday. Another 1,000 were canceled at O'Hare and 30 at Midway on Thursday.

The weather emergency warning issued Tuesday in anticipation of the storm prompted a flood of commuters to take public transportation instead of driving. Metra, which provides regional commuter rail, announced additional afternoon trains for workers getting off early. The crowds were so intense, however, that the official schedule was dropped, and trains instead left whenever they were full.

On Wednesday Metra canceled service on lower-traffic routes and had Sunday schedules for others, which offer a fraction of regular weekday service. Some Metra routes operate on the tracks of private freight railroads, and service on these lines was curtailed at 7 p.m., when it normally runs until after midnight.

Metra officials said that they were unable to get their storage and maintenance facilities properly cleaned by contractors, causing cancellations into Thursday. The regional bus system, PACE, also curtailed service Wednesday night and Thursday morning, as sub-zero temperatures set in across the region.

In the city, bus lines were far behind schedule Tuesday night, but service continued even as thousands of cars were stranded throughout the city. Chicago Transportation Authority (CTA) trains were severely overcrowded, even with extra cars added. At times service was temporarily

suspended due to frozen switches, signal failures, and other issues.

Thousands of workers leaving downtown on Tuesday took Lake Shore Drive, a major eight-lane road serving the northern side of the city. Lake Shore Drive closely parallels Lake Michigan, and weather can differ sharply in proximity to the lake. Well in advance of the storm, the National Weather Service had issued a warning for severe blizzard conditions, including heavy snowfall, sharply reduced visibility, wind gusts of over 60 miles per hour, and 10 to 20 foot waves on Lake Michigan.

These exact conditions began in early to mid-afternoon, but the city left the road open until a cascade of accidents occurred around 7 p.m. The road was closed by 8 p.m., but thousands of stranded vehicles remained as the severity of the storm peaked. Cars and buses stalled, snow drifted several feet high, and motorists struggled to conserve gas amid bitter-cold temperatures. CTA workers worked tirelessly to rescue stranded drivers and passengers, but some were trapped for nearly 8 hours. According to city officials, more than 900 cars were stranded in the snow.

On Thursday, the road was reopened just before 6 a.m., 34 hours after it was closed. Mayor Richard Daley offered no apology for the fiasco. City officials insisted that the road was kept open because if closed the resulting gridlock elsewhere might hamper emergency vehicles.

The storm caused large numbers of power outages across Illinois. More than 177,000 Commonwealth Edison (ComEd) customers regionally were without power. Chicago, being the hardest hit, had 50,000 households without power. In the south suburbs there were around 12,800 households left without power, in the north suburbs about 11,000 and in the west suburbs about 2,000. There are only about 300 crews working on restoring conditions to pre-blizzard status. ComEd reported that 97 percent of their customers had power restored by mid-day Thursday, although a map on the company web site indicated pockets of hundreds of households within Chicago still remained without power Sunday.

So far at least 18 deaths have been linked to the storm. One was 60-year-old Peter Davis, who fell into Lake

Michigan after becoming disoriented from the snow Tuesday night. Officials received an emergency call that he had fallen in but when they arrived they were unable to mount a rescue due to the high winds and rough waters. A team was sent out to recover the man's body on Wednesday.

The youngest fatality so far attributed to the storm was the death of Matthew Tyler, a 17-year old teenager from Newton County, Indiana. A tractor-trailer lost control on a rural road because of the snow and slammed into Tyler's small car. An unidentified hitchhiker was also killed.

Andrew Berg froze to death after leaving his car, which was stuck south of Illinois Route 18, and trying to walk one mile to his home. Friends said the 44-year-old only made it a few hundred feet from his vehicle before collapsing.

A homeless man was found dead in an alley Wednesday afternoon behind an apartment building in Logan Square, Chicago. He has still not been identified. The local CBS News reports that he died of "natural causes"—cirrhosis of the liver—though the outside temperature was well below freezing. With a huge homeless population and a threadbare emergency shelter system, the city is a frequent scene of such tragedies (see "Spate of cold-related deaths in Chicago").

John Carson, 46 years old, was pronounced dead in his home on South Clyde Avenue in Chicago. His home had no working heat, but an autopsy Thursday found that he died from "chronic alcoholism." Another man, Jeffrey Manor, also died in his home, which had no working heat.

Many of the storm-related deaths were due to heart attacks brought on by laborious efforts to remove massive snowdrifts and clear streets. On Tuesday evening, 58-year-old Edward Jeans died of a heart attack while working to remove snow from in front of his house. John Soboda, 62, helped his neighbors clear snow and push their cars all day, then went to warm up his wife's car Wednesday night. When he didn't return, Mrs. Soboda went to look for him and found him unresponsive in the driver's seat of the car. The DuPage County coroner's office reported at least four other heart attack deaths on Wednesday, all men in their 60s who collapsed after shoveling snow for hours.

Other victims succumbed to the bitter cold and stress in their vehicles. In Greyslake, Illinois, Gregory Myers died of a heart attack in his car while he was stranded on US 45 near Casey Road. Susan Smith, 57, was found dead in her vehicle in the parking lot of an Alpine Chapel. Coroners stated that she died of a heart attack and her diabetes, which was aggravated by the stress likely contributed to her death. After going missing for 24 hours, a woman was found dead in her car in Lake County, assumed to have died from exposure to freezing temperatures.

In numerous cases, emergency crews could not get through

the snow with ambulances and had to run long ways with their equipment.

Vincent Cerrentano, a 71-year-old working as a security guard at a ComEd facility, died of a heart attack in his car Tuesday night. An ambulance was dispatched, but according to the *Chicago Tribune*, it got stuck after 15 minutes, still two miles from Cerrentano. "The department dispatched a firetruck," the paper notes. "The crew reached the ComEd facility but had to hike 20 minutes down a long, impassable driveway and cut open a gate before they found Cerrentano slumped over the steering wheel in his vehicle."

With many city streets still virtually impassable, garbage collectors and other city workers have struggled to make their rounds. Sanitation Commissioner Thomas Byrne stated Saturday that trash collection had resumed in only 1,500 of Chicago's 19,000 alleys. On Saturday, Williams King, 59, was forced to get out of his garbage truck to shovel the snow blocking access to the garbage cart and succumbed to a heart attack.

Another municipal worker, William "PT" Scardamaglia, suffered a fatal heart attack at the end of his shift plowing snow in Kane County Wednesday. Kane County Chairman Karen McConnaughay said he was refilling his truck with salt when he collapsed.

This death toll is likely to increase, especially since many houses are still without power and many homeless people are left out in the cold. Libraries, upon which the poor and homeless particularly depend for warmth, have been closed for two days.

Mayor Daley now has to address the cost of the clean-up in the city, which is already bowed with a structural deficit of \$1 billion. The last major blizzard, in 1999, cost the city approximately \$77 million. Much of it was handed out to private companies. This cost was used as a pretext to increase a range of taxes on the working class. The \$100 million price-tag of the 2011 blizzard will likely be used to further raise taxes or cut social spending even more.

Additional snowfall on February 5 and 6 has compounded clean-up, with many tertiary streets still unplowed since Tuesday. According to the Chicago Sanitation and Streets department, more than 500 pieces of snow removal equipment have been deployed, including plows, backhoes, and dump trucks. Even so, thousands of residents have been left to dig streets out on their own.



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