

# Will Cambridge homeowners make it through winter unscathed?

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THE ISSUE: Extraordinarily harsh cold, heavy snow hit Cambridge in the first half of winter. THE IMPACT: The weather has left many residents with burst pipes and dripping roofs.

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The intense period of cold weather and heavy snow that kicked off the new year caused a range of problems in Cambridge and many other Boston-area communities.

The winter of 2018 has been a cavalcade of storm events, Arctic temperatures and even a 'bombogenesis cyclone.' These weather events can cause devastating damages, said Robert Ramsey.

Ramsey, principal of WTPhelan Insurance in Belmont, said he advises his clients on how to protect their property before a loss occurs, but when the unexpected happens, his agency guides clients through the claim process to help restore their home or business as soon and as comfortably as possible. WTPhelan was founded in 1898. Robert and his brothers are fourth-generation owners. He joined the firm in 1986. They have six office locations throughout Middlesex County.

Pipe freeze-ups have been the most common and most devastating issue for many of his clients this winter.

## Frozen pipes galore

Calls about frozen pipe issues, typically a call from a customer or two over the last five years, have increased dramatically to 10-12 customer calls this winter alone, said Jerry Barbato, owner J & Bs Plumbing Co in Watertown, a business that has been in operation for four decades.

Consecutive days in single-digit temperatures accompanied by strong winds have caused an unusual amount of damage, several plumbers said.

Frozen drains have been a frequent problem, too, and not always easily detectable.

People call me up for a clogged kitchen sink, you go there, you try to snake it [and] it's a big block of ice, Barbato said.

Domenic DellAnno from DellAnno Plumbing, a Stoneham-based business that services many clients in Winchester, advises anyone to keep the heat at 65 degrees consistently, and on particularly cold days to keep the faucets dripping overnight to prevent the pipes from freezing. Keeping doors on kitchen cabinets open will also help heat reach pipes, DellAnno said.

It comes down to where customers want to spend their money, Barbato says.

What I tell my customers is 'I'd rather you pay National Grid or your oil man than pay me to fix frozen heat pipes, water pipes and drain pipes,' he said.

## Running out of heating oil

Keeping a home warm enough to prevent the pipes--or people--inside from freezing can perversely easily leave a home without heat if the building's furnace or boiler still runs on heating oil.

For area customers of Somerville-based Cubby Oil, though, there were few worries because the oil company monitors customers use from its in-house computers, which are linked to customers oil tanks, according to Cubby Oils Delivery and Credit Manager, Eric Mohan. The company remained proactive during the recent cold snap, delivering to residents when it became clear that a tank was about a quarter full.

If you're with a reputable company, a full-service company, you should not have a worry in the world, according to Jack Maloney, who owns Arlex Oil Corporation.

Arlex and Cubby saw delivery drivers working a lot of overtime to keep up with customers needs due to the cold, Maloney and Monhan said. Not only were delivery drivers busier, but Mohan and Cubbys owner, Charlie Uglietto, pitched in on the delivery side to keep up with demand.

During more typical winter weather, a programmable thermostat can help keep costs down, Mohan said, adding that leaving the thermostat relatively low during the day also helps.

He stressed the value of communicating with your oil company. If customers have any worries that they might run out of heating oil just give a call, Mohan said. Although oil companies keep a close eye on their customers tanks, its always nice if customers call, he said just to be on the safe side.

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'Never shovel the roof'

If you suffered a leaky roof in the early winter storm, or if you saw water spots on your ceiling, said Lauren Claffey of EM Snow, a roofing and siding contractor in Waltham, you may be experiencing ice dams.

In a perfect situation, melting snow runs through a roofs gutters, but when ice blocks gutters, or when a ridge of ice forms at the edge of a roof and prevents melting snow from draining off the roof, water can back up behind the ridge, or dam, and drain inside, causing damage to walls and ceilings.

Some people remove their gutters, but then they have flooding in their basements, Claffey said.

If you cant manage an immediate fix before the next snowstorm, Claffey recommends scraping snow off the roof with a specially-designed roof rake. But, she cautions, dont stand on the roof, and be careful you dont take the snow off to the shingles, because that can damage them.

Never shovel the roof, she said. You can cause serious damage.

Joe Cahill of Waltham's Cahill Roofing and Construction, a roofer for 25 years, advises homeowners to learn from the lessons of 2015. If there are problems from ice dams, be sure to hire a contractor who knows about roofing.

Check references. Some people get a cheap price, but a year later, theyre having problems again. Most people dont have any problems if it is done right," he said.

Historic homes

Older homes often have poor or little insulation so theyre more prone to pipes freezing and ice dams forming, according to Doug Hanna, co-founder of S+H Construction in Cambridge.

Keeping faucets at a slow drip can prevent freeze-ups and get you through the very cold weather until long-term, permanent solutions such as insulation and pipe insulation can be installed, he said.

Poor insulation allows roofs to heat up, which encourages the formation of ice dams.

Remember the winter of 2015? Ice dams the size of small waterfalls hung off the eaves of many homes, Hanna said. Keeping your roof cold, preferably by installing proper insulation in the rafters, or as a stopgap measure, by keeping the temperature low on the top floor of your home, will help prevent ice dams.

Ahead of next winter, he also recommended installing 12 to 18 inches of foam insulation along the perimeter interior of the sill from the basement.

Its an economical way to gain energy savings and comfort in the first floor, Hanna said.

Old windows can also pose problems. Arlington Historical Commission member Patrick Guthrie recommended sealing around the edges of drafty windows with caulking. He also noted that storm windows can help keep out a draft; most historic homes already have storm windows. These should be checked once a year, he added.

Making sure your fireplace damper is closed all the way can also keep out a draft.

If your older home does suffer some damage this winter, Guthrie noted that its important to find a contractor who knows old homes.

Somebody who understands how older homes are constructed and how theyve been retrofitted over time will be able to know how to fix them, he said.

Staff writers Kerry Feltner, Mariya Manzhos, Abbi Matheson, and Amy Saltzman contributed to this story.