

Ice dams can be a dangerous and destructive winter hazard

by Ken Wyatt | For the Citizen Patriot

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CITIZEN PATRIOT | DAVE WEATHERWAX

Ice dams can pose dangers to gutters, roofs and people.

If you like your glass half-full — and frozen as well — then raise it in a happy toast to that most spectacular feature of this Michigan winter: the icicle.

It's everywhere in Jackson County ... glorious in sunlight, gracefully hanging from eaves trough and lamp post, fence and shrub, street sign and rooftop. But beyond its inherent beauties is a ... well, damnable reality: the ice dam.

You haven't experienced a heart-stopping Michigan winter until you've awakened to what one Jackson family did one night a few years ago — the crash of gutters collapsing under the enormous weight of ice buildup. True, all was well again, but only after several hundred dollars of insurance-funded repair work to replace two sections of gutters.

Addressing ice dams

- Don't get on your roof to solve this problem; it could be dangerous.
- Avoid standing on the ground and "chipping away" at the ice. Not only could this cause damage to your roof, you can be seriously injured by falling ice, debris or tools.
- Contacting a roofing contractor to fix your roof leak will not prevent future ice dams.
- **Seal air leaks in your attic to stop warm-air leakage (the source of the problem).**
- **After sealing leaks, add additional insulation in your attic.**
- **Provide adequate attic ventilation so that the underside of the roof and the outside air are at the same temperature.**
- Clean leaves and other debris from gutters before the first snow.

Source: *Energy Star Web site, a joint program of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Energy: www.energystar.gov/index.cfm?c=home_solutions.hm_improvement_icedams*

According to the federal government's Energy Star Web site: "Ice dams usually occur after a snowfall and several days of freezing temperatures. Warm air inside your home leaks into the attic and will warm the underside of the roof, under the snow, until it reaches the cold overhang. The overhang tends to be at the same temperature as the outdoors and the melted water will refreeze and form an ice dam and icicles."

This is what all of us have been observing for weeks throughout the community. House after house is adorned with icicles and ice dams.

Philip Kasprzycki, co-owner with his wife, Nicole, of the Leoni Township-based Gutter Genius, is one of about half dozen local businesses that deal with ice-dam issues.

"We've been doing a lot of this work for the past three weeks or so," he said.

The first order of business with a buildup of ice is to remove the ice dams and clean out the gutters.

"You have to handle it with kids' gloves," Kasprzycki said. "Sometimes we have to use torches to break up the dams and get them out of there."

Lesson in ice dams

[Learn how ice dams form and the science that is involved](#)

Last month, Kasprzycki had a homeowner who lost a 60-foot-long piece of gutter from ice buildup. This week, he has been doing ice removal at the American Cancer Society building on Page Avenue.

An ice dam may damage gutters, the roof or even the inside of the house if water backs up enough to penetrate.

"It's covered in the policies we write for homeowners, but it may not be covered in renter policies," said Joseph Wolfe, a veteran agent with Jackson's Protection Center. "It seems like 100 percent of houses have icicles — but for what percentage is it a problem? At this point, we haven't had a lot of calls, but we're bracing for it."

Kasprzycki said some homeowners opt not to file a claim with their insurance company for fear it will make rates go up.

Wolfe explained that most policies have a \$500 deductible. If the cost of repairing the damage isn't much more than that, it may make good sense simply to pay the cost out-of-pocket.

While structural damage is the major worry where ice is concerned, there is also some danger in dealing with ice dams and icicles.

"When those things come down, they can weigh hundreds of pounds," Kasprzycki said.