

Power outages impact thousands

By Sarah Sobanski

More than 5,000 Bancroft and surrounding area Hydro One customers were left in the dark because of winter storms.

Between Jan. 4 and 6 heavy snowfall, freezing rain and high winds knocked out power for thousands in Hastings County. The number of people affected varied. Some sources reported around 6,500 without power by Wednesday afternoon. Hundreds still hadn't had their power returned by noon on Friday.

Chief operating officer for Hydro One Greg Kiraly said in a Jan. 4 release that trees account for 30 per cent of outages. He said winter weather causes trees to fall on Hydro One lines and damages equipment.

"Especially during ice storms like that, branches break right off," said North Hastings Fire Services fire prevention officer Matt Musclow when he sat down with *Bancroft this Week* to discuss how locals can be prepared for severe winter weather and power outages, after the storm. Like it does hydro crews, storm debris and road conditions can hinder emergency services. It's important for residents to prepare where and when they can.

"Ambulances are getting stuck left and right, right now. By keeping your driveway clear and branches back it's just going to save you time. Time is everything, especially in rural areas."

On that note, Bancroft OPP Const. Philippe Regamey suggested being a good neighbour when discussing ways to stay safe and secure in times of turmoil. Being a good neighbour could mean helping someone clear his driveway or, as Regamey said, sharing a generator.

"Checking on your neighbours regularly and inviting people over for dinner or to spend the night, especially when it's cold out like the past week," said Regamey. "Lots of people have generators in order to keep things running. Most people don't run the fridge so place your items outside in a cooler to keep them cold but not where animals might get them."

Two of the biggest concerns of firefighters for residents during power outages are that their carbon monoxide and smoke detectors are working, and that they reduce fire hazards when finding alternative sources to do every day things such as lighting at night or cooking.

Because power outages don't give you any warning, it is imperative that you have your smoke alarm tested, or if you don't already have one, you should take the time to contact professional electricians like those at <https://aardvark-electric.com/> to get one fitted. This will help to protect you and your family at all times, even when a power outage has occurred.

"If you've got a wood stove you've got to watch now because a lot of people get complacent. They think that they've set up carbon monoxide and smoke [detectors] but if you don't have battery backed-up ones they're useless at this point," said Musclow. "If your [carbon monoxide detector] is only a plug in one, it's no good."

He added, "If you're going to use your barbecue, use it outside. Don't bring it in the house. Don't use propane heaters in the house. You're going to get carbon monoxide. They have indoor heaters; there are proper indoor heaters. Those propane salamanders, don't use those in the house. Don't use charcoal inside."

He also warned that reaching for fire-burning candles as a source of light is a bad idea. Large battery-operated candles or flashlights are a better option.

"With candles you've got a fire hazard no matter what," said Musclow. "Basically a flashlight or battery-operated candles are the way to go now. They actually give off quite a bit of light."

If candles are the only means of light available to you, Musclow recommended putting them in a secure place. There should be a glass chimney on the candle and you should make sure it is out when leaving the room.

Hydro One saw more than 248 outages affecting over 28,000 customers over the course of the storm. Musclow explained families should have an emergency management plan for long power outages such as those suffered by residents last week.

"As part of our emergency management we say always have 72 hours of batteries, water and food. Stuff that you can eat without having to heat it and blankets and lots of layers this time of year. Just be aware of your home and know your home escape plan."

Musclow said it is important for every member of a household to understand the family's emergency escape plan. He gave a hypothetical where three members of a five member family know to meet at the mailbox during a fire, but their two youngest members don't.

"There are two kids in the house. One runs to the neighbour and one hides in the car, as an example. We become search and rescue meanwhile they're completely fine. We put our crews at risk for no reason. That's why those home escape plans are huge, plus it's going to get you out quicker," said Musclow. "Today's fires you've got a minute to a minute and a half to get out. Your smoke alarm should activate within 30 to 45 seconds and then you've got a minute to a minute-45 before a room of origin has reached flash over."