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For Metra, weather-related delays snowballed into crew shortages

Frustrated customers criticize bad decisions, poor communication

By Richard Wronski and Matthew Walberg, Tribune reporters

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After waiting for more than 45 minutes to board a delayed Metra Union Pacific Northwest train, passengers were relieved to finally be on their way out of the Ogilvie Transportation Center. The relief didn't last long.

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Moments after leaving downtown, riders were told their train had been declared an express to Crystal Lake. That meant most would need to get off at the Clybourn stop. Scores of passengers waited on an open platform in double-digit subzero cold for nearly an hour.

"We thought, this must be a joke, they can't be making people get off," passenger Joe Holahan, of Arlington Heights, said Tuesday. "This was a dangerous decision."

That incident Monday seemed to capsize many of the complaints that Metra commuters have been voicing this week: hasty decision-making, poor communications — or no communications at all — and insufficient preparations for the Big Chill of 2014.

Metra apologized for the incident Tuesday, saying the decision to unload the passengers was made by the Union Pacific Railroad, which operates the line under contract.

Although Metra expects schedules to be back to normal Wednesday morning, commuters for two days have experienced finger-numbing delays and unnerving cancellations.

At Union Station on Tuesday evening, crowds jammed platforms and waiting areas for the second night in a row.

Mostly, Metra has been blaming equipment issues like frozen switches for many of the problems it had maintaining its schedule. But with the delays tending to snowball, Metra also found itself up against workforce problems.

Federal law controls how many hours crew members, dispatchers and signal employees may work, according to the Federal Railroad Administration. The statute sets maximum on-duty periods and mandates rest breaks during long shifts.

Long delays have played havoc with normal schedules, Metra spokesman Michael Gillis said, and crews were no longer available to staff some trains, leading to cancellations.

"It happens when you have situations where trains are delayed and crews work more hours than normal," Gillis said. "This is a safety mandate. You want your crews well-rested."

Metra's struggles with the weather continued well into Tuesday, when the agency canceled 25 morning trains after scratching at least 27 trains during the previous evening's rush hour.

Word of many cancellations didn't come until late Monday, and others weren't announced until 5 a.m. Tuesday, giving commuters little time to adjust plans.

Riders clamoring for information on getting to work relied on email alerts and also went to Metra's website in record numbers, but complaints about a lack of information on delays and other problems piled up like drifting snow.

Metra's website tallied 166,815 visits on Monday, the most traffic ever since the website was set up in September 2009. On an average day, the website sees 45,000 to 50,000 hits, Metra said.

The combination of high visitor traffic and the especially large number of alerts being issued for delayed trains bogged down servers and slowed updates and access to the site, Metra spokeswoman Meg Reile said.

Traffic on the site also spiked Tuesday. At one point just before 7:30 a.m., there were 3,200 people on the website at the same time, Reile said.

Normally, when a train is delayed, an email alert is sent out at the same time that a service advisory is posted on Metra's website. But customers said they found the website updates often lagged behind the email alerts.

Jeff Ulrich, of Chicago, said he monitored the Metra website so he would arrive at his unheated Mayfair station just in time to board an 8:06 a.m. train Tuesday. The website promised on-time arrival, but the Milwaukee District North train was at least 20 minutes tardy, he said.

"I'm so furious at Metra right now," Ulrich said after arriving at Union Station. "If their website says a train is on time and you go out and wait in unheated conditions for 30 minutes, it's downright dangerous."

Passengers at the station were "stomping around trying to keep warm" while awaiting their ride to work, he said.

Frustrated Metra customers have taken to social media to vent their ire. One Twitter site, @OnTheMetra, "celebrates the endless list of #MetraFail."

Metra Deputy Executive Director Pete Zwolfer said Tuesday that contrary to what some customers may have thought, Metra had been making preparations for the extreme weather since Friday.

"We knew we were getting the cold, and we knew we were getting some snow," Zwolfer said. "But when we started getting a foot (of snow) dumped on us, it made things worse."

Metra started running into problems with staffing on Monday when crew members began reaching their federally decreed limit on hours, Zwolfer said.

Many crews, for example, normally work both morning and evening runs, with a mandatory four-hour rest break in between, Zwolfer explained.

But if morning trains are delayed, then the rest break gets pushed back, disrupting evening schedules. And if evening trains run late, crews may not be able to get the required eight hours of rest before the start of their next shift, he said.

Most of the time, there are enough backup crew members to fill in, but the roll of these extra workers was quickly exhausted in this case, Zwolfer said.

A 30-year Metra veteran, Zwolfer said this week's double whammy of cold and snow ranks in the top five weather woes he's experienced, with perhaps the worst being a March 1998 ice storm.

After Monday's incident on the UP Northwest Line, Metra conferred with Union Pacific officials, who took responsibility for unloading the passengers at Clybourn, Zwolfer said.

The railroad is working "to make sure it doesn't happen again," he said.

Chicago is not alone in dealing with weather-related problems. Transit officials in other major cities also find it challenging to keep trains running on time in the bitter cold.

"You call people at (New York commuter lines) Metro-North or Long Island Rail Road, they'll tell you that they work hard to keep things running but sometimes conditions make it very difficult," said Robert Paaswell, the former head of the Chicago Transit Authority who now serves as a distinguished professor of civil engineering at City College of New York.

And frozen switches are not unique to Chicago, officials said. New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which oversees two commuter lines and the subway, brings on extra workers to monitor critical switches and signals during major snowstorms and keep them free of snow and ice.

"I can certainly confirm that keeping switches warm is a major priority for us in New York during any winter storm," said Aaron Donovan, spokesman for the agency. "In the past couple of days, with the snow and the cold snap, we've had scattered problems with signals and switches."

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