



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council Public Health and Public Safety Committee

Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, April 4, 2023

7:00 PM

This meeting was held via GoToWebinar and was called to order by Chair Kelly at 7:00 pm and adjourned at 8:14 pm with a roll call vote of all in favor (Councilor McLaughlin, Councilor Davis, and Chair Kelly), none opposed, and none absent.

Others present: Neha Singh – Mayor’s Office, Ellen Shachter – OSPCD, Charles Breen – Fire, Karin Carroll – HHS, Nicholas Antanavica – ISD, Stephanie Widzowski – Clerk of Committees.

Roll Call

Present: Chairperson Charlotte Kelly, Vice Chair Lance L. Davis and Matthew McLaughlin

Committee
Minutes
(ID # [23-0335](#))

Approval of the Minutes of the Public Health and Public Safety Committee Meeting of February 27, 2023.

RESULT: ACCEPTED

AYE: Chairperson Kelly, Vice Chair Davis and Ward One City Councilor McLaughlin

Order
(ID # [23-0501](#))

By Councilor Burnley Jr. and Councilor Scott

That the Fire Chief, Inspectional Services Director, and Director of the Office of Housing Stability work with this Council to assess the feasibility of annual reporting on the number of fires, the causes of those fires, the number displaced by each fire, and if those displaced were able to relocate within Somerville.

Liaison Singh explained that the Administration is working to fill the recently vacant Director of Emergency Management position and they will want to have that staff present in this conversation as well. Some staff present had questions about the timeline of the request in the order, and Chair Kelly said she would check with the sponsors on the intent of the item. Superintendent Antanavica said that ISD is working on setting up a better data collection system for displaced residents and listed the data that they are currently able to track, such as the number of units and buildings affected by fire and plumbing or electrical permits applied for to repair damages. Dir. Shachter talked about the difficulties in tracking long-term displacement and recounted previous incidents that resulted in large-scale displacement. She added that the city has data for residents who get in touch, but systemic reporting will be difficult.

Chair Kelly requested that data provided by Chief Breen and Superintendent Antanavica be compiled into a single report for the next City Council

meeting. Dir. Shachter added that the available data, for the time being, is the number of units affected and where displaced residents were relocated, for those that engaged with OHS services.

Liaison Singh said that the Administration is not ready to commit to annual reporting, given that the item is to explore the feasibility of annual reporting, but confirmed that there is interest in doing so.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Order
(ID # [23-0237](#))

By Councilor McLaughlin

That the Director of Health and Human Services update this Council on efforts to provide warming centers for unhoused individuals during the recent cold spell.

Taken together with item 23-0163. Dir. Carroll gave background on the planning process for the warming centers and on the acquisition of funds. She noted that HHS did not have the capacity to operate the centers internally, and so hired Somerville Homeless Coalition (SHC) as the vendor, but that SHC also did not have the capacity to run the shelter every night. Somerville met the criteria for deploying the emergency shelters three times this winter. Dir. Carroll explained why city-owned buildings were used for the shelters and obstacles encountered there - for example, the library heating failed during a cold snap. There were also medical emergencies at the warming centers, some of which resulted in 911 calls. Dir. Carroll said that HHS will conduct an after-action report on the warming centers. Councilor McLaughlin asked about establishing a permanent location in the future and requested that East Somerville get a warming center as well. He also stated that the end goal is not just to protect against the cold, but to get people off the streets, and he listed services or resources the city has offered in the past. Dir. Carroll said that she is unaware of plans for a permanent location now and said that it will be difficult to secure a site for weekends and overnight hours. Councilor McLaughlin said he would support funding SHC if practical, but expressed concern for their capacity to cover the whole city.

Councilor Davis urged HHS to submit a budget request for this item this fiscal year. Chair Kelly requested in writing for detail on the criteria for deploying warming centers as well as a copy of the after-action report once it is written. She asked if cooling centers use similar criteria and requested information on that as well.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Resolution
(ID # [23-0163](#))

By Councilor Scott, Councilor Kelly and Councilor Burnley Jr.

That the Administration provide an update regarding the progress in establishing a Warming Center for un-housed residents.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Order
(ID # [23-0216](#))

By Councilor Pineda Neufeld, Councilor Burnley Jr. and Councilor Wilson That the Director of Health and Human Services discuss with this Council, the ending of the federal COVID-19 public health emergency, its impact on residents, and the city's access to vaccines, testing and other resources.

Dir. Carroll said that the federal COVID-19 public health emergency will be lifted May 11, and Massachusetts plans to follow suit. She stated that COVID is heading toward endemic status and the implications of that are still unclear, but she did speak to insurance coverage for vaccines. She also listed which medications will still be available through telehealth and other resources that will be changing. For now, Somerville still has masks and test kits available. One change of concern is that Medicaid is requiring re-enrollment this year; recipients are no longer automatically qualified. Dir. Carroll said that HHS met with partners to prepare a response this season, including community outreach in multiple languages, to ensure those who need it can requalify.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED