

To: City Council

Cc: Mayor Curtatone and Mayor's Office, SPD Chief Charles Femino

From: Mark Niedergang, Ward 5 City Councilor

Date: February 8, 2021

Regarding staffing of the Somerville Police Department

Questions and comments in response to Chief Charles Femino's memo of January 31, 2021, "RE: Item 211175: Somerville Police Staffing"

What is the appropriate size and staffing of the Somerville Police Department (SPD)?

This question is of tremendous interest and concern to the community and to the Council. The Council is currently in the process of considering whether to hire additional police officers. We are four months from FY 2022 budget deliberations. It is certain that the SPD budget and "reimagining policing" will once again be a major focus for budget discussions.

I am writing this memo to respond to Chief Femino's 10-page staffing which describes SPD staffing and advocates for hiring additional police. The Chief's memo makes statements that raise many questions about policy and deployment of SPD officers. In this response, I share some questions, concerns and ideas. I ask that Chief Femino or the Administration respond now or during the FY 2022 budget deliberations.

I also present some alternative ways in which SPD could deploy police officers that could provide greater public safety and/or save money which could then be reinvested in other departments to meet critical public safety and essential survival needs for residents in Somerville.

I look forward to hearing from my colleagues and the community on these topics to help us arrive at what we believe is an appropriate level of staffing and funding for the SPD.

The broader context: The city budget and safety and needs of people in Somerville

We Councilors need to look at the larger context of the overall City budget and ask ourselves where funds can best be allocated to produce the best outcome for our residents. We need to look at public safety through a lens of what we can accomplish with limited resources.

Public safety is **broader than just police and fire**: It's housing, food, health, mental and emotional health, pedestrian and cyclist safety, and more. How we fund public safety is a burning question, especially with COVID-19 directly impacting the health and well-being of so many in Somerville.

Violence **prevention and community health** is where our funds are best spent to keep residents safe, whether in the SPD or in other departments. If we invest more in expanded care and prevention services, the City could spend less on police to clean up after the problems or violence occurs.

In the last two years, four pedestrians have been killed by motor vehicles in Somerville. Yet the Somerville Police Department is far more richly funded in terms of its mission than is the Mobility Division of OSPCD. According to annual data from Mass DPH, Somerville experiences many more opioid related deaths and suicides than homicides.

Year	Homicide	Suicide	Opioid Related
2013	1	11	11
2014	1	1	14
2015	2	8	17
2016	0	10	21
2017	1	9	16

Cause of Death in Somerville, from Mass DPH "Death Data"

It is our job as Councilors, working with the Mayor and the Administration, to determine priorities for how the City uses our budget dollars for the public safety and health. Do we really need seven police officers in cars, 24/7/365? Or could some of those funds be provided instead to Health and Human Services, to the Office of Housing Stability, to Mobility, or to a fund to support families who are hungry or facing eviction?

These decisions will need to be made in the FY2022 budget, but there are also decisions to be made right now, such as how many of the 10 requested police officers the City hires and possible supplemental funding to meet other urgent needs. We do not need to wait to hire the new Director of Racial and Social Justice or for some future still-unknown process of reimagining policing in order to make sensible budget decisions based on existing programs.

With this context in mind, the rest of this memo focuses on just one place where I believe cuts could be made in SPD staffing to make funds available for more needed City services. I will have additional specific suggestions for SPD budget cuts in June when the Council and the public receives and reviews the SPD's budget request for FY2022.

SPD "Last Half" shift staffing (12 midnight - 8am)

I suggest that SPD could deploy fewer than seven cars during the "Last Half" shift (midnight to 8am). It would seem possible to deploy four or five cars during this time during the week, but perhaps not on weekends. Reducing the staffing to five cars for Sunday through Thursday (leaving seven cars on Friday and Saturday nights) would free up the equivalent of 10 officer shifts. These could be redeployed to other, more impactful positions in the SPD, such as the Family Services division (there is currently a vacant position in this unit that deals with domestic violence and other family issues) or the Detective unit (also currently with one vacant position). Or the funding for those positions could be reallocated to other departments to meet survival needs of residents which would have a greater positive impact on public safety.

Last June, I requested information in order to understand SPD calls for service ("CFS") by shift. The following is based on data shared by Chief Fallon with the Council during FY21 budget deliberations (July 9). I've provided a link to the document at the bottom, and encourage you to take a look. Note that SPD operates on three shifts: Day (8am-4pm), First Half (4pm-midnight), and Last Half (midnight-8am).

Calls for service from 12 midnight to 8 AM (the Last Half shift) are only about 23% of all calls for service. In comparison to each of the other shifts, the Last Half shift responds to only about **60% as many calls as do the other two shifts.**

Year	Total CFS	Last Half CFS	Last Half %
2016	59,445	13,052	22%
2017	57,307	13,283	23%
2018	54,436	14,123	26%
2019	51,336	11,799	23%

Detailed CFS based on CFS information, page 2.

In comparison to the other shifts, the last half shift has far fewer calls for service which require two or more cruisers to respond. Only 17% of all such calls occur on the last half shift.

Shift	CFS	CFS Requiring ≥ 2 Cruisers	% of CFS Requiring ≥ 2 Cruisers
First Half	18,939	4,640	31.21%
Day	20,598	7,640	51.39%
Last Half	11,799	2,588	17.41%
	TOTAL:	14,868	

Detailed CFS requiring 2 or more cruisers to respond, 2019, based on CFS information, page 4.

Despite this reduced demand, **SPD has the exact same deployment on the Last Half shift as the other two shifts:** 7 officers in 7 cars.

The Chief argues that the nature of calls during the Last Half shift tends towards situations requiring an "all hands on deck" approach. The frequency of "ShotSpotter & Shots CFSs" reports are presented as evidence. But the data presented for actual "Confirmed Shots by Shift" show that over the past four years there were only 2 (2017), 3 (2018), 5 (2019) and 6 (2020) confirmed shots fired in each of these years during the Last Half shift.

The Chief provides two detailed example scenarios where shots were fired at the Mystic Development. Only one of those examples occurred during the Last Half shift. The data leads to the conclusion that emergencies such as these examples are extremely rare. I share my colleague's concerns about violent crime in Somerville, especially in some locations, but the City should be staffing and funding the police based on the actual demand for their response. **It is not prudent or cost effective in terms of the use of City funds to deploy extra officers 365 days a year for just a handful of serious emergencies a year. There must be better ways to respond to a few serious emergencies than to deploy unneeded officers 8 hours a night, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.**

Here are some questions and ideas for more appropriate staffing for the Last Half shift. These are rough, and probably have flaws. However, I offer them in the spirit of considering any possible alternatives which could free up funds for other programs. I believe that exploring and employing creative solutions will ensure that we're using city funds in the best possible way to support community safety.

- Chief Femino stated that there are no extra officers working in the police station during the Last Half shift. Could SPD shift some officers from their administrative desk work during the day to work during the Last Half shift? This would provide a few officers in the station who could respond to an emergency from 12 midnight – 8 am.
- Could one or two SPD patrol officers be kept "on call" with a patrol car at their residence? During a rare emergency where most or all patrol cars respond, these officers can be activated to provide the necessary cover for other calls for service.
- Given far less traffic between midnight and 8 am, SPD response time must be significantly less than when there is a lot more traffic. Our city is only 4.1 square miles, so cars don't have far to travel to get anywhere. Can't SPD make do with fewer than seven cars during the Last Half shift?
- SPD has mutual aid agreements with other police departments. Why can't SPD call in officers from Cambridge, Arlington, Medford to cover the rest of the City during the rare "all hands on deck" emergency between 12 midnight - 8 am? The Somerville Fire Department has a mutual aid agreement where fire trucks from other cities come to Somerville to fight a big fire, and vice versa.
- Both emergencies described in the Chief's memo happened at the Mystic Development. The Somerville Housing Authority (SHA) has its own Police Department that patrols the Mystic Development and other SHA properties. Do those officers not respond to emergencies? Why are those officers not factored into the analysis in the Chief's memo? What role did SHA officers play in responding to these two emergencies?
- Why not transfer officers from the Last Half shift to other duties focused on crime prevention? For example, if the Mystic Development is a neighborhood where a lot of violent crime occurs, why not deploy additional staffing for crime prevention there? Why not assign one or two police officers, or even better, youth workers, to work the Mystic Development and do crime prevention there? Those officers or youth workers could walk that neighborhood, do community policing, get to know the people and problems there, and be right there should an incident occur. They could work in collaboration with the SHA Police and the many social service providers who serve residents of the Mystic Development.

There is also some additional data that would be useful to understand SPD staffing better. Here are just a few things that I ask that Chief Femino provide to the Council, either now or as part of his budget presentation in June.

- Violent crimes broken down by the three shifts.
- Overall crime data and violent crime data in Somerville and SPD staffing (both sworn officers and civilians) over the past 30 years.
- I will have other requests for data, as I expect will other Councilors, as we approach budget time.

Returning to the Question

What is the appropriate size and staffing of the Somerville Police Department?

In order to support public safety and health with limited City resources, we need to look at every position in the SPD and ask if the funds could be better used if spent elsewhere. This memo has focused on just one example.

Violence prevention is where our funds are best spent to keep residents safe. Meeting the basic survival needs of our residents, especially during a pandemic, should be our top priority. Our responsibility as City Councilors who oversee the budget is to use those funds as wisely and effectively as possible for the health, welfare and safety of our residents. We certainly need to re-imagine policing and develop more effective ways to deliver the emergency services and response that currently only the SPD provides. But we also need to evaluate whether funds are best spent on reacting to problems or preventing and resolving them.

If you have read this far, thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing and reading responses, reactions and ideas as we continue to discuss the appropriate level of funding for the Somerville Police Department.

Mark Niedergang
Ward 5 City Councilor

I want to thank Derrick Rice, a Craigie Street resident, for his help with research, writing and formatting this memo. Mr. Rice has been closely following the Council's discussions and keeping others in the community informed of our work.

References

SPD Staffing Memo from Chief Femino, Feb 1, 2021

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Received by Public Health & Public Safety Committee of the Whole

CFS by Shift 2017-2020.pdf, July 9, 2020

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1msuQA-rZ409jO3XaeFMqVaM-ywXvq1h0/view>

Available via <https://www.somervillema.gov/fy21budget> > Documents > Police

Massachusetts Death Data, 2013-2017

Available at <https://www.mass.gov/lists/death-data>

Annual reports by Massachusetts Department of Public Health