



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES DEPARTMENT

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MEMO

October 26, 2020

TO: Public Health Public Safety Committee
FR: Doug Kress, Director of Health and Human Services
RE: Response to Agenda item 210687

As requested during the October 8th City Council meeting information is provided below addressing item 210687: That the Director of Health and Human Services advise this Council what services are available to our neighbors experiencing homelessness, mental illness, and addiction, and where additional funding could improve those services or enable new services.

Health and Human Services staff in partnership with the Somerville Police Department and partner organizations has been collaborating to address the concerns of individuals dealing with homelessness.

HHS staff met with Councilor Strezo on October 8th, 2020 to discuss this issue.

HHS staff have partnered with the SPD to review areas of concern. These areas have been identified based on concerns from constituents, elected officials, local businesses and service providers. Walk throughs of the areas have provided valuable insight for changes and improvements that could be made to better address some of the concerns.

One area that has been problematic is the space in Seven Hills Park (nearest the childcare center). After visiting this site with SPD on September 25, 2020 a recommendation suggested by Captain Donovan is to relocate the benches that are nearest to the brick walkway. These benches have become a gathering spot for individuals to use as a restroom and/or alcohol consumption site. A visit to this area provided me with the opportunity to meet members of the community experiencing homelessness and to see firsthand the paraphernalia left behind in open spaces including empty liquor bottles and used syringes.

As we visited Davis Square, we also assessed locations that could work for an outdoor restroom. The lack of access to a restroom has become more problematic during COVID with restaurants that have typically allowed non patrons to use their restrooms no longer offering that as an option due to COVID safety protocols. We've heard this as a concern from service providers as well.

HHS staff hosted a meeting on October 22, 2020 with stakeholders to learn about the services available, identify gaps in services, and support work already occurring. Service providers expressed their appreciation that the City was interested in working with them to ensure services for their clients.

Below is a summary of the items discussed during that meeting.

- Current concerns include safe restroom access (substance use prevention lens), shower access, where to send people for services, need to add day and overnight shelter spaces, lack of multiservice center (offering mental health supports, access to healthcare, etc.), need for additional resources, clients not using 240 Albany Street due to safety concerns and lack of clarity about residency eligibility, complaints coming into the City via residents, businesses and elected officials, lack of fulltime staff to conduct outreach, and how to handle those who are in need of services but not ready for help.
- Also noted were the need to look at this as a regional issues, concerns don't stop at city lines, some resources are location specific (War Memorial shelter is only for Cambridge residents), the challenge to building trust when you do not have anything concrete to offer the client (housing option), and the need for better communication amongst providers and other partners (City staff).
- Services available include the online referral option offered by the Somerville Homeless Coalition (SHC) in addition to their walk-in hours, street outreach, a physician goes out with First Step, the OD2A training opportunities and distribution of Narcan through Somerville Prevention's collaboration with SHC and Fenway Health (ACCESS), collaboration with other partners (ACCESS) and the partnership with SHC and First Step.
- Opportunities include learning more about advocacy opportunities at the state level, continued relationship building, sharing (if allowable) clients stories to help illustrate the challenges and resiliency of clients (interaction referenced about a client making space in his covered space to allow for a continued conversation with a service organization), ways to make known the work that is happening, and reinforcing the narrative that this is a community issue that impacts all who live here.
- Other opportunity/leverage points include community meetings happening in other cities and towns that bring together stakeholders to discuss concerns (is this something that might make sense to host here?), connect with faith based organizations to see if they have space available to use, Cambridge has a running list of resources (is that something that would be of value in Somerville?), the Somerville Police Department would like a brochure/pamphlet with organizational information and resources that they could keep with them during shifts (Nancy Bacci will follow up), could local gyms or the YMCA allow shower access, and assistance can come from the SPD when trying to with locate clients.
- Point of information- the Somerville Open Space plan does not address the homeless population.

Next steps include the creation of a resource pamphlet for the PD (as requested), reviewing cost estimates for an outdoor restroom option (if it's decided to move forward with that option), brainstorm session to identify possible locations for daytime shelter spaces, and planning regularly scheduled meetings with all stakeholders.