

Madalyn Letellier

From: Elyse Best [REDACTED]
Sent: Tuesday, February 17, 2026 6:47 AM
To: Public Comments
Subject: Re: Please add my thoughts: I would appreciate it
Attachments: letter to city hall.docx

Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Flagged

This email is from an external source. Use caution responding to it, opening attachments or clicking links.

I am sending an updated version of my last response: I had to edit somethings. Thank you, for understanding

Elyse Best:

Hello,

My name is Elyse Best. I live in Ward 3 in public housing. I am also a resident with disabilities, and I serve as Co-Chair of the Human Rights Commission. I am speaking tonight in my personal capacity as a resident who is deeply concerned about the state of equity in Somerville and about where public resources should be directed.

One of the most urgent areas that requires investment is mental health.

This is not just a personal belief. The data across Massachusetts show that the need is real, widespread, and growing.

More than one in five adults in Massachusetts lives with a mental health condition, representing well over a million residents.

At the same time, access to care remains uneven. Many residents are unable to obtain counseling or therapy when they need it, and cost, workforce shortages, and long waitlists continue to be major barriers.

In community health centers—the places many low-income and disabled residents rely on—about **84% report waitlists for behavioral health services**, and patients often wait weeks or months to be seen.

Emergency departments are increasingly being used as a last resort. Nearly **39% of behavioral-health-related emergency visits in Massachusetts last more than 12 hours**, and many patients wait even longer for placement or treatment.

These numbers tell us something important: people are not getting help early enough, and when they finally seek care, the system is already overwhelmed.

Mental health is not a luxury. It is a disability rights issue, a public health issue, and a human rights issue. Access to care affects a person's ability to work, to remain housed, to participate in civic life, and to feel safe in their community.

We also know that trauma and mental health challenges are not distributed equally. In Massachusetts, more than one-third of young people have experienced trauma, abuse, or significant stress, and many young people report prolonged periods of depression or hopelessness.

Communities that already face barriers—immigrants, Black residents, other people of color, LGBTQIA+ residents, and people living with disabilities—often encounter additional obstacles to culturally competent and linguistically appropriate care. Structural inequities and stigma continue to affect who receives treatment and who does not.

This is why culturally competent mental health services matter so deeply. People need providers who understand their language, their culture, their trauma, and their lived experience. Without that, many people simply do not seek help at all.

At the same time, substance use and addiction remain major challenges in Massachusetts, with roughly **one in ten residents experiencing a substance use disorder**.

All of this points to the same conclusion: the demand for care is high, the system is strained, and the need for investment is urgent.

If Somerville calls itself a welcoming city, we must live up to that promise. A welcoming city is one that takes care of people—not just in words, but in budgets, staffing, and services.

We should be investing in:

- Accessible, culturally competent mental health services
- Crisis response and hotlines that people trust and feel safe using
- Trauma-informed care and addiction services
- Outreach and early intervention so people receive help before crises occur

Mental illness does not wait months for an appointment. Trauma does not pause because a waitlist is full. People need care when they need it.

Right now, we are living in a time of profound uncertainty and stress. People are struggling. Communities are afraid. Vulnerable and targeted residents are being targeted and marginalized. In times like these, mental health support is not optional—it is essential infrastructure for a humane and functioning city. I also understand the fear of reaching out because mental illness and other illnesses are on the Federal government's target list. Even I am afraid to declare my own. Can you imagine with people who are afraid to leave their homes in general and for appointments because of ICE, waitlists, pending MassHealth cuts, cuts to other survival programs, and generally feeling unsupported?

We should be asking ourselves a simple question:

If we have resources, why would we not invest them in helping people heal, stabilize, and live with dignity?

Because at the end of the day, caring for people is not an extra expense. It is the foundation of a just and equitable community. **WE DESERVE IT! IT IS OUR RIGHT!**

Accessibility:

The other part of this is accessibility—because we have a serious problem in Somerville with the ability of people with disabilities to move safely through the city. There are many ways for a city to be accessible. Somerville has a serious problem with this.

And when I say disabilities, I mean all disabilities: physical, sensory, cognitive, psychiatric, chronic illness, and neurodivergence. I am also talking about our aging population, who often face many of the same barriers.

Across Massachusetts, nearly **one in four adults lives with a disability**, and the number increases significantly with age. As the population ages, the need for accessible infrastructure is only going to grow. Accessibility is not a niche issue; it affects a substantial portion of the community.

Accessibility is also not optional. Under the **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)** and Massachusetts accessibility laws, cities are required to maintain public rights-of-way—including sidewalks, curb ramps, and crossings—in a way that allows people with disabilities to use them safely. Snow and ice removal are part of that responsibility, because an accessible route that is blocked or dangerous is not truly accessible.

Right now, residents are experiencing serious and ongoing barriers.

Complaints about accessibility—especially during winter—are constant. Snow removal is inconsistent, curb cuts are often blocked or only partially cleared, and sidewalks are frequently narrowed to the point where a wheelchair, walker, or stroller cannot pass safely.

I personally called 3-1-1 about several locations where curb cuts were not cleared properly. In one case, the space that had been shoveled was so narrow that a wheelchair could not reasonably pass through. These are not small inconveniences; they are barriers that force people into the street.

And that is exactly what is happening.

People using wheelchairs, motorized mobility devices, walkers, and even people who simply need stable footing are being pushed into the roadway because sidewalks are impassable.

I have had to walk in the street myself.

My elderly friend, who is living with dementia, has had to do the same.

This is unsafe, and it is preventable.

Bus stops and bus lanes can become especially dangerous during storms. When access points are not cleared properly, people must navigate snowbanks, uneven surfaces, and unclear pathways just to board a bus. For people who are neurodivergent, visually impaired, or living with mobility or balance issues, these conditions are not just inconvenient—they are disorienting and dangerous.

And we are not talking about extraordinary activities.

We are talking about going to the grocery store, picking up medication, going to the post office, getting coffee, city hall, to a town hall, or simply leaving one's home to get fresh air for crying out loud.

Basic daily life should not require risking injury.

It should not matter whose property a sidewalk borders or how responsibility is divided between private owners and the city. What matters is that the public right-of-way remains usable for everyone. Not only that ALL

SIDEWALKS have to be accessible! Accessibility cannot depend on chance or on whether someone happens to shovel thoroughly.

There needs to be a clear, proactive plan:

- Dedicated funding for accessible snow removal
- Priority clearing of curb cuts, ramps, and bus stops
- Wider clearance standards that account for wheelchairs and mobility devices
- Faster response times for accessibility complaints
- A system that does not rely solely on residents reporting barriers after the fact

Be proactive!

Because accessibility should not be reactive. It should be built into the system from the start.

Disability rights are civil rights. The ability to leave one's home, travel safely, and participate in community life is fundamental. When sidewalks are blocked and crossings are unsafe, people with disabilities are effectively confined to their homes or forced into dangerous conditions.

A welcoming city is not just one that says everyone belongs. It is one that builds a physical environment where everyone can move safely and with dignity.

And right now, we can and must do better.

Commissions and Civic Engagement

Last but not least, I want to speak about the roles of city commissions and the need to adequately fund them.

Commissions are not symbolic bodies. They are one of the primary ways residents participate directly in civic life. Many of us serve as volunteers, but we bring lived experience, professional knowledge, and a deep commitment to our community.

Dedicated commissioners and chairs are not in this for titles. They are here to serve.

Right now, many commissions are trying to do meaningful work with extremely limited resources. And the reality is that you cannot carry out meaningful community work without a functional budget.

When commissions are underfunded, it sends a message—whether intended or not—that this work does not matter. But it does matter.

With adequate funding, commissions can:

- Host public forums and educational events
- Invite community members to speak and participate

- Bring in professional speakers and trainers
- Support non-profits and programs
- Conduct outreach to communities that are often left out of civic processes
- Partner with organizations that are already doing critical work
- Provide programming and initiatives that strengthen the community
- Investigative services, training development, community and trust building efforts, follow up monitoring, and so on.

These are not extras. These are the very responsibilities that make commissions effective, and it's mandated. By law.

Research consistently shows that communities with higher levels of civic participation have stronger public trust, better public health outcomes, and more responsive local government. Civic engagement is not abstract—it improves how cities function and how residents experience daily life.

Somerville prides itself on being a community-driven city. But community-driven work requires investment. Equity does not happen by accident; it requires resources.

Serving on a commission is a meaningful way to exercise one's civic rights. When residents give their time, they're actively engaging in democracy at the local level. These aren't "small" community commissions, either. They're platforms where we can model what equity truly looks like—where real human rights, disability rights, and women's rights are upheld in practice, not just in name.

Beyond that, commissions help ensure things function properly. The community deserves oversight. People have questions, and they're entitled to clear answers. They're entitled to access, to remedies, to thoughtful recommendations—and to real, tangible outcomes that grow out of careful, consistent work.

That kind of civic participation should be strengthened and properly resourced, not deprived of the support it needs to be effective.

Commissions work hard. They dedicate hours outside meetings, listen residents, research issues, rigorously advocate for improvements, speak up and out and try to make the city better for everyone.

But commitment alone cannot replace resources.

If we want commissions to educate, to engage, and to serve, they must be given the tools to do so. That means realistic and sustainable budgets that allow commissions to operate effectively and equitably.

Because a strong, civically engaged community benefits everyone.

And Somerville has always been strongest when residents are empowered to participate, to lead, and to care for one another.