



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS

CITY COUNCIL

CHARLOTTE KELLY

CITY COUNCILOR AT LARGE

Conveying budget priorities on housing investments, in response to Item 23-0159, Mayor's Request for input on priorities for the FY 2024 Budget.

1. Project description

This proposal outlines a path to enhancing and expanding the already existing housing stability landscape in Somerville. OHS and community partners in Somerville have spent years building critical infrastructure to address the current housing crisis. Through ARPA investments, the City has expanded many of those efforts. Somerville can deepen its investment in housing stability by further expanding these life saving measures and ensuring they are permanently included in the General Fund budget. This proposal outlines short term, medium term, and long term expansions on our already existing housing stability infrastructure. The short term proposals include expanding the flexible rental assistance and building a program to secure hotel rooms for vulnerable people. The medium term proposals include expanding the Municipal Voucher program and the legal services line items in the budget. The long term proposals include increasing the Early Acquisition Trust Fund. Each one of these proposals build on already existing infrastructure that has been created and fills gaps in the current housing stability landscape.

Short term:

\$8 million for flexible rental assistance to continue meeting the urgent needs of low-income and immigrant tenants facing eviction and displacement.

\$1.7 million for a short term hotel program for vulnerable people. This program provides short term shelter for newly arrived immigrants, people experiencing housing emergencies such as fires, and people who are unhoused and cannot find space in local shelters.

Medium term:

\$2 million invested in the new Municipal Voucher Program (MVP), potentially adding up to 20 more vouchers to the current 35 planned in the program.

\$400,000 for OHS Legal services to increase legal assistance to tenants and qualifying for adjusting the income qualification to be inclusive of tenants who are at or below 110% AMI

Long term:

\$8 million to the Early Acquisition Trust Fund to increase the supply of permanently affordable housing in Somerville.

2. Project justification

The ongoing housing crisis in the region requires massive public investment in order to combat the market forces, gentrification, and economic crises facing our residents. The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the struggles and deepened the levels of precarity that residents in Somerville face particularly around housing insecurity. Housing is a human right. The fundamental source of the housing crisis is the economic forces in the US that are designed to commodify housing instead of providing it as a basic right. While Somerville cannot solve this root problem alone, we must take a multi-pronged approach to addressing the symptoms. Somerville has built incredible infrastructure to address the symptoms of the housing crisis by investing in services like establishing the Office of Housing Stability, creating flexible funds to assist housing unstable residents, and providing legal support for residents facing eviction.

When I speak with housing advocates on a daily basis, I hear very clear demands for resources they need to protect residents and keep our neighbors in their homes. Whether they are immigrant households living with multiple families in small apartments, or graduate workers making starvation wages at some of the country's most prestigious universities, or elderly residents living in affordable housing who are too hungry to fill out paperwork, the housing crisis in Somerville has impacted thousands and thousands of our residents.

The solutions laid out in the project description come directly from the residents on the frontlines of the housing crisis, the organizers, the advocates, the residents experiencing instability, displacement, eviction, and homelessness.

As OHS stated in their memo:

“OHS has been inundated with requests for rental assistance often receiving close to 50 new requests each month. Our experience working with these families since the start of the pandemic tells us that many are in need of long term housing solutions as they will be extremely rent burdened once existing temporary rental assistance funding ends. In addition, we have worked with many vulnerable families living in

dangerously overcrowded conditions that need options for more appropriate housing. We have seen disproportionate need in the immigrant and low income communities of Somerville.”

As the Director of HHS said her letter to the AHTF:

“We are aware that there are no truly affordable housing options for many of the families we work with because they are excluded from eligibility for federal housing programs. While immigrant households can apply for state public housing it is our understanding that there are currently approximately 27,700 households on Somerville’s state public housing waitlist. Unless these families meet very narrow emergency criteria it would be many years until they had any opportunity to access subsidized housing in Somerville.”

As Somerville Renters Committee member Denise Lauers said:

“I don’t see it fair to have only 3 options: pay for a ridiculous and unaffordable price to live in private housing in Somerville, leave, or live in public housing. We all say housing is a human right. Are we sure about that? We have so many unhoused in our City. I see many families renting a 1 bedroom in someone’s apartment to live with their family of 4,5, 6. I see school liaisons dealing with homeless children on the daily basis. I also hear our government saying they support affordable housing but I don’t truly see a real change.”

Without major investments, the housing crisis in Somerville will continue to deepen and widen its impact, swallowing up neighborhoods and whole communities leaving nothing but multimillion dollar condos and lab buildings in its place. We need to build out our emergency response resources for people who urgently and unexpectedly need housing services. We need to protect our residents with resources to stay in their homes like flex funds and legal counsel. We need to expand our affordable housing offers to ensure our neighbors can stay in Somerville for the long run.

3. Timeline and evaluation:

- a. Specifics of the timeline will be left to the Office of Housing Stability and other departments who showed decisive leadership on this project in 2022. In OHS reports to the Somerville City Council and Affordable Housing Trust Fund, we would consider this programs successful if the following milestones were accomplished:
 - i. Add additional units to the currently existing MVP program one (1) to two (2) months

- ii. Updating contracts with housing legal services partners to expand legal services one (1) to two (2) months
- iii. Develop short term hotel program two (2) to three (3) months
- iv. Report on progress made with MVP implementation one (1) month
- v. Report on additional legal services provided one (1) month
- vi. On board staff or subcontractor for short term hotel program one (1) to two (2) months
- vii. Implementation of short term hotel program two (2) to three (3) months
- viii. Update the Council on the following programs one (1) month)
 - 1. MVP
 - 2. Legal services
 - 3. Short term hotel program

4. Estimated budget

Cost	Purpose	How calculated
\$8 million	Flexible rental assistance	Based on doubling the allocations previously made to the ARPA Flex Rental Assistance via ARPA funds
\$1.7 million	Short term hotel program	Based on the cost providing 15 rooms, 365 days a year at an average cost of \$250 dollars per room resulting in an overall service cost of \$1.4 million, plus an additional \$300,000 in payment for staffing, program design, and document creation
\$2 million	MVP direct rent payments to landlords	Based on the costs provided by OHS on the first three years of direct payments to landlords estimating an average of \$30,000 per year for each household
\$400,000	OHS Legal services	Based on quadrupling expanding the FY23 budgets legal service line item and take into consideration changing the income qualification from 150% below the poverty line to below 110% AMI
\$8 million	Early Acquisition Fund	Based on the initial investment in the Early Acquisition Fund from the FY23 budget

5. Conclusions

All of these requests are programs envisioned by our residents, advocates, and organizers on the frontlines of the housing crisis. Each one of these programs has a proven track record of success in Somerville or in nearby communities. Somerville cannot solve the root problem alone, but we can increase and expand our already existing infrastructure to tackle this multi-faceted problem with multi-pronged solutions.