



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS  
**KATJANA BALLANTYNE**  
**MAYOR**

**Memorandum Regarding Lateral Hiring- Police and Fire**

The City is experiencing an unprecedented hiring demand for first responders. In the interest of supporting our common goal of protecting the public safety of our community, the City of Somerville will employ the civil service tool of lateral hiring.

The purpose of this memorandum is to update the City Council on current staffing levels for both Police and Fire, and to inform the City Council of the Administration's plan to address the immediate staffing challenges currently being faced by both departments.

**Summary of Current Staffing Levels**

Currently, the Somerville Police Department has 6 patrol officer vacancies resulting from both the shallow applicant pool and a high number of applicants not completing the process. According to the Secretary of Public Safety and Security, this is a trend that can be seen across Massachusetts in every sector of public safety- State Police, Dept of Corrections, etc.

The Somerville Fire Department will begin onboarding 6 new firefighters in April 2024 pending City Council approval, and as of February 2024 still has at least 1 additional vacancy. Additionally, the Fire Department will need 12 new firefighters to staff the new Assembly station, which is expected to be ready by February 2025.

**Hiring Decision Within Civil Service**

Available hiring tools offered by Civil Service include requesting a certification list, requesting a reserve list from those on the certification list and hiring directly from other Fire or Police Departments via lateral hiring.

The Ballantyne Administration has decided to employ lateral hiring at this point in time to address acute staffing shortages in both Police and Fire. The driving force behind this decision is to increase staffing levels needed ensure public safety. **There is no intention to cease usage of the certification list for normal hiring or to utilize lateral hiring as a standard practice.** However, hiring 12 firefighters and 6 police officers at once is not a normal circumstance, and requires the deployment of other Civil Service tools, in this case lateral hiring.

The only other available tool provided by Civil Service is the utilization of the reserve list, which has been disallowed by the City Council. Because last round of Police recruitment using this list

did not result in successfully filling all open positions, lateral hiring is the only remaining option within Civil Service.

It is our intention to first hire for six Police officers so that new hires can start as early as possible this summer. We will then shift to hiring for 12 new Firefighters- note the 12 new firefighters will not automatically be placed at the new station, Chief Breen will determine placement. We plan to open the Police hiring application in early April, and then open the Fire hiring application in late July/early August. There will also likely be an additional request for a certification list for additional vacancies which are already expected subsequent to this lateral hiring process.

### **Summary of Contributing Events**

#### *Commitment to Open New Assembly Station*

The decision to open a new Fire Station in Assembly Sq. was made in October 2021. The new station was initially planned to be a Squad with 8 staff. However, Mayor Ballantyne made the decision in August 2022 to expand the station from a Squad to an Engine, which will have 12 on staff. The upcoming Assembly Fire Station has created the need for high volume of new firefighters at one time, which is greater than the typical hiring process.

#### *Reserve List Background*

In April 2022 the City Council voted against the use of Reserve Lists, which are an additional tool offered by Civil Service. Reserve lists can be used to avoid understaffing, as a reserve list consists of candidates who have been through the process fully and are waiting for a position to open. Often departments will request a reserve list when there are anticipated vacancies or when recruits do not make it through the process, leaving vacant positions to fill. A reserve list would have been a viable tool to prepare for the 12 new Firefighters, but because of the decision to disallow usage by the City Council we are unable to utilize that tool.

#### *Nationwide Police Climate*

The current national police climate is also playing large role in PD recruitment and retention. The Somerville Police Department is seeing both a reduction in applicants and a reduction in those applicants making it through the process. This is not a situation that is unique to Somerville, which is also making the field more competitive between municipalities. With the abundance of police officer positions available throughout the Commonwealth and the lack of qualified candidates, more communities are requesting lateral transfers as a way to fill vacancies with officers who are already trained.

#### *Summertime Preparation*

Over the past 5 years, violent crime on average was 15% higher during summer months (June-Aug) compared to Spring (March-May). Utilizing lateral hiring will allow SPD to be proactive rather than reactive ahead of this summer. Because the most recent recruitment effort only resulted

in only three positions being filled, SPD continues to have vacancies and there is not time to begin a new process at this point if the goal is to have officers active by as early as possible this Summer.

### **Rationales for Utilizing Lateral Hiring**

#### *Time to Recruit*

Lateral hiring is the most efficient way to address our current staffing challenges. Applicants will not need to attend an academy before they can begin working, which will allow them to begin working more quickly than a new recruit who would have to attend academy first. Hence, the benefit of a lateral hire is that person is already trained, resulting in a 60-90 day hiring process that includes advertisement, selection, background investigations, interviews, and scheduling before CAPM, as compared to 9 -12 months for new recruits. Lateral Police applicants will also arrive already POST certified. There is also currently an academy backlog for both Police and Fire which could potentially further delay start dates. Lateral hiring is the only option available that will enable us to hire Police Officers during summer, when an uptick in violence is typically seen.

Lateral hiring also allows for flexibility regarding how many applicants we interview, whereas civil service requires  $2n+1$  be interviewed, with  $n$  being the number of positions. Each interview under civil service is typically 1.5-2 hours and requires the time of an interview panel.

Regarding the new Assembly Square Station, there is not time to ensure it will be appropriately staffed with firefighters using the certification list. Twelve fire applicants will require 25 interviews and at least 38 working hours that must be spent interviewing by each panel member. This is very challenging to schedule and can also be a source of further delay. As explained above, the certification list process is already being utilized to fill regular vacancies. As regular vacancies arise, the Fire Department and Police Department will continue to request certification lists to fill those vacancies, as was just done with the 6 new Firefighters going to CAPM next week.

#### *Overall Public Safety Cost*

Using lateral hiring will allow the city to save on overtime costs by hiring and onboarding more quickly than the typical certification list process. When there are vacancies, overtime is incurred to ensure there are no gaps in service. To staff the new Assembly Fire Station with overtime, in the event new firefighters are not hired, we have calculated the cost to be nearly \$144,000 per month. Additionally, \$1,067,770.37 in overtime has already been incurred by Firefighters, not including superior positions, as of March 22. In terms of Police overtime as of March 22, \$1,170,259.97 has been incurred for Officers specifically, not including superior officer overtime.

While this high volume of overtime results in very high overtime costs, it also greatly contributes to burnout and low morale of our Firefighters and Police Officers- which is unacceptable. One of our top priorities is to protect the mental and physical health of our current Police and Fire staff. Furthermore, it is our fiscal responsibility to do everything we can do to fill vacancies at a faster rate, and we are seeking to do so utilizing this tool of lateral hiring which Civil Service provides.

Additionally, because these candidates will have already gone to academy there is also no need to pay for either Police or Fire academy which will save on additional costs, both in terms of time

saved and actual cost of the academy. The Police academy is 26 weeks long and the Fire academy is 10 weeks long. New recruits are put on the City payroll during their time in academy so there is a cost to the City during that time. Additionally, in some cases there may be a cost to the City to pay for the academy as well.

### *Diversity*

Finally, an additional benefit to lateral hiring is that it provides a greater opportunity for the City to hire with intention and eye towards increasing diversity and representation amongst our Fire and Police departments. Being inclusive in both our police and fire departments will help enable our first responders to engage in the unique cultural contexts of the Somerville community. Currently, there are 6 women in the Fire Department and 14 women in Police, and the Police Department is 72% White and the Fire Department is 89% White. Utilizing lateral hiring, we can tailor our recruitment efforts to target specific populations that would benefit our residents, such as women, those who speak multiple languages and people of color.

### **Conclusion**

The lateral transfer process is intended to help protect public safety, using every civil service tool we have as City government. The safety of our community must come first, though we recognize this may not be an ideal solution for all stakeholders. Lateral hiring is not a way to circumvent the normal civil service hiring process, but instead is one of the tools that civil service allows us to meet the challenges of the present moment. We are facing an unprecedented number of public safety vacancies and lateral hiring is our best course of action to efficiently fill them. Additionally, this type hiring allows us to potentially increase diversity amongst the departments directly tasked with protecting our diverse and dynamic community, and finally, it includes an added cost saving for the City.