

# FY23 Fair Housing Commission Annual Report

City of Somerville

Written by: Hanalei Steinhart, former Fair Housing Specialist & Inclusionary Support  
Presented by: Shannon Lawler, Fair Housing Specialist & Inclusionary Support



# Background

## **Federal Context:**

The Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing rule, issued in 2015 and terminated in 2020, called for municipalities to foster inclusive communities by addressing persistent segregation and housing discrimination. It required that municipalities submit an "Assessment of Fair Housing," which Somerville Housing Division submitted in 2017.

## **State Context:**

Somerville's Fair Housing Commission focused on the backlog of complaints with the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD) in FY23 and addressing this at a local level.

## **Local Context:**

Somerville City Council expanded the Fair Housing Ordinance, updating it in May of 2023 to include relationship status and structure following the 2020 domestic partnership policy that recognized polyamorous partnerships.

# FY23 Fair Housing Commission Activities

## Enforcement

- In December 2022, the Fair Housing Commission submitted a letter to the Somerville City Council on the status of Fair Housing enforcement in Somerville.
  - The letter discussed the backlog at the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination and the increase in complaints received by the FHC.
  - Commissioners explored the idea of becoming a “substantially equivalent agency” to HUD in order to enforce fair housing law and address the issue of long wait times for complaints submitted to MCAD. These discussions continued into FY24.
  - The letter also advocated for the allotment of additional funds to MCAD to address the backlog.

# Education and Community Outreach

- Fair Housing Month (April)

- The FHC held two educational events in April of 2023 which were open to the public in collaboration with the Somerville Public Library.
- The first event was a discussion of Richard Rothstein's book, *The Color of Law*, held over Zoom.
- The second event was a screening of *Segregated by Design*, a film based on Rothstein's book, at the Central Library. The film was screened in English with Spanish subtitles.

- Anti-Displacement Task Force

- A member of the FHC served on the ADFC committee focused on issues of residential displacement. The task force's work to identify ways to prevent displacement continued through FY23 and into the ensuing fiscal year. At the end of FY23, the task force was preparing to submit a home rule petition to Somerville's City Council on rent stabilization measures.

## Education and Community Outreach (cont.)

- **First Time Homebuyer Courses**

- The Program Specialist continued to present at the Somerville Community Corporation's First Time Homebuyer courses (FTHB) on a bimonthly basis. The course is open to anyone who would like to learn about the homebuying process.
- The Fair Housing Specialist's presentation includes information on the fair housing rights and responsibilities of tenants, purchasers, and sellers in Somerville.
- The presentation also covers Housing Division's Inclusionary Homeownership Program and Closing Cost Assistance Program.

- **Language Access**

- The FHC continued to facilitate use of the City's Language Access Plan by providing educational materials in the languages commonly spoken by Somerville residents to help address gaps in knowledge between the City's English-speaking residents and those who rely on translated resources.
- Fair Housing staff continue to collaborate with the Somerville Office of Immigrant Affairs (SOIA) to conduct outreach to non-English speaking residents who may not otherwise submit Fair Housing violation reports due to a lack of access to the complaint process or concerns around immigration status and retaliation.

## Assessment of Fair Housing Priorities

The three Assessment of Fair Housing (AFH) priorities from the report submitted by Housing Division in 2017 were:

- To ensure that the Fair Housing Commission is fully seated and staffed
- To increase outreach to Somerville constituents, specifically tenants and landlords, on fair housing issues
- To explore collaborations with local fair housing agencies in the region

## Assessment of Fair Housing Priorities (cont.)

- 1. Ensuring the Fair Housing Commission is fully seated and staffed:** The Fair Housing Commission was fully staffed in FY23. Members were Claudia DeAndrade, Patrice Faulkner, Dennis Fischman, Rona Fischman, and Janine Lotti.
- 2. Increasing outreach to tenants and landlords on fair housing issues:** The FHC's outreach was primarily virtual over GoToWebinar, the Commission's Facebook page, and the City's Fair Housing webpage, with resources available in multiple languages. The Commission continued to meet virtually in FY23 and all meeting information is added to the City calendar to allow and encourage the public to join the monthly meetings. The Commission hosted events on racism in housing for Fair Housing Month.
- 3. Exploring regional collaborations with local fair housing agencies:** The FHC's collaboration with local housing organizations included presenting on rights and resources under fair housing law at the FTHB courses offered by the Somerville Community Corporation (SCC). The Fair Housing Specialist referred complainants to enforcement agencies depending on the violation reported and connected households with resources such as the Office of Housing Stability and legal services. The FHC also has taken steps to raise awareness of the statewide backlog of fair housing complaints with MCAD.



# FY23 Fair Housing Complaints

- **Thirteen fair housing-related reports of discrimination were received between July 1, 2022 to June 30, 2023.**
- Does not include reports submitted directly to MCAD or HUD without first contacting the FHC
- Reports of discrimination are made through the FHC's Referral Form online, over the phone, to the staff liaison's email, or referred from other City divisions and departments.
- The Fair Housing Specialist assists constituents in filing complaints with all relevant enforcement agencies. Often, the complaint for discrimination is based on a protected class covered by state and federal jurisdiction and is referred to both MCAD and HUD.

# FY23 Fair Housing Complaints

Reports of discrimination received July 1, 2022 to June 30, 2023:

- Protected classes represented were Race, Color, Disability, Familial Status, Sexual Preference, and Source of Income.
- Complaints based on discrimination against the protected class of Race were highest (4) followed by Color and Disability (2 each).
- Most complaints received were from Ward 1 (3) followed by Wards 4 and 7 (2 each).

Chart 1: Fair Housing complaints received vs Fiscal Year (FY 18 - FY 23)



- 5 complaints submitted to MCAD
- 5 complaints referred to OHS
- 1 complaint referred to legal aid services
- 5 complaints unresolved due to lack of response from complainant
- 4 complaints referred to Suffolk University Law School's Housing Discrimination Testing Program

Questions?