

Candidate Questionnaire 2025, Somerville Fair Housing

Fair Housing means no discrimination! Candidates for Mayor and City Council had the chance to present their views on non-discrimination in housing by answering a questionnaire from the Somerville Fair Housing Commission, a nonpartisan group of volunteers. We are sharing all the answers we received. The Commission hopes you, the voters, will use the candidates' answers as you decide how to vote in the September 16 primary and the November general election.

Answers from incumbents (officeholders) are first; then, answers from challengers.

Incumbents

Candidates who are running for re-election this year discussed their views on Fair Housing before, in 2023 or 2021 or both. You can find their answers from those years at the **bottom** of the Commission page on the City of Somerville website:

<https://www.somervillema.gov/departments/fair-housing-commission>.

This year, the questions for incumbents were:

1. Now having served multiple terms, what advice would you give to first-time candidates about protecting residents from housing discrimination?
2. Are there any institutional structures in Somerville that you feel are barriers to fair housing? Is there anything that you would like to re-imagine or update?

Here are all the answers we received from incumbents (through page 10):

1. Now having served multiple terms, what advice would you give to first-time candidates about protecting residents from housing discrimination?
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Mayoral candidates

Katjana Ballantyne, current Mayor of Somerville:

In my four years as mayor and eight years as city councilor, I have both sponsored and voted for many initiatives aiming to make housing in Somerville more affordable as well as more accessible to our most vulnerable residents. These initiatives have included, for example, A 20% affordability requirement for new residential construction, The 2000 Homes Program, The strengthened Condo Conversion Ordinance, The Office of Housing Stability, The Jobs Creation and Retention Trust Fund, The Talent Equity Playbook, The Community Land Trust, the work of the Fair Housing Commission and more. As mayor, I

have continued my leadership on these and more initiatives to make housing more affordable and more fairly accessible.

The most common reasons for being denied housing in Somerville are economic, which disproportionately affect immigrant communities, people of color, and people with disabilities. Local market rates for housing exceed what many people with disabilities and low-income, and middle-income earning residents and their families can afford. The local market rate for housing is driven by renters who are often unrelated, young professionals or students who can pay a high price to rent for the short time they need to live here, usually two to four years, and sometimes less. Households, with only two wage-earners, and especially single-parent households simply cannot afford to pay what a group of unrelated young professionals or students can pay. In addition, the percentage of residential units owned by out-of-state investors has grown substantially. Long-time owners who may have had good relationships with their long-time tenants and imposed only reasonable rent increases are now commonly replaced by investor/owners seeking maximum financial return for their investment.

All of these factors along with rapidly rising rents and housing prices more generally have left many residents struggling to afford and/or access housing. Exacerbating these monetary access problems are the challenges in ensuring that vulnerable tenants do not experience unlawful discrimination in violation of local, state and federal anti-discrimination.

As indicated in the recent survey that I initiated as mayor, conducted by Somerville's Anti-Displacement Task Force and supported by other research, the two most frequent types of unlawful housing discrimination reported by Somerville residents are source of income/housing voucher discrimination and discrimination against persons with disabilities including refusal to provide required reasonable accommodations.

The question of how to prevent unlawful discrimination is complex so the advice that I would offer a new candidate is multi-faceted and is informed by the work of my administration's Office of Housing Stability and its Housing Division's fair housing compliance staff. I believe that the primary components of a strong strategy to prevent housing discrimination in rental housing includes, but is not limited to, the following: (a) robust training and education of tenants, landlords, realtors and

others about landlord/tenant rights and responsibilities under relevant Anti-Discrimination laws; (b) well trained city staff that can assist tenants in enforcement of Anti-Discrimination laws through direct advocacy with landlords, management companies and realtors and through the filing of formal fair housing complaints with HUD or MCAD where appropriate; (c) making available legal representation for tenants to pursue fair housing objectives for legally viable claims; (d) staying connected to area resources such as the Suffolk University testing program to maximize the effectiveness of fair housing interventions; and (e) the creation of programs that both assist tenants to afford the upfront costs of housing AND that incentivize landlords to rent to tenants with Section 8, MRVP, HomeBase or other tenant based rental assistance. While enforcement is critical, we need to use our creativity to employ both carrot and stick approaches to ensure maximum access to housing for our residents, especially those who are most vulnerable to discrimination.

I would also want new candidates to understand that it is unfortunately often the case that tenants are unsurprisingly reluctant to file formal discrimination complaints related to housing denials as they do not wish to start off on a negative foot with a new landlord and because they are often far too busy with their housing search to focus on potential fair housing enforcement which may or may not be successful in achieving successful rehousing. It is critical that tenants are empowered to make the best and most informed decisions available to them regarding their enforcement options and their housing search. It is also imperative that tenants receive this critical information in a format and language that is fully accessible to them and through staff that understand the incredible stress that an involuntary housing search can place on a vulnerable family, older adult, immigrant or person with disabilities.

I would also note that, at the present moment, immigrant households face an additional set of unique housing challenges. At the present time, the Trump administration has begun a process of serving some landlords with subpoena's seeking complete information about immigrant tenant households. While it is unclear if such a subpoena has been served in Somerville yet, it is only a matter of time. Immigrants are well aware of their vulnerability and many are highly reluctant to pursue litigation or other claims that might bring them to the attention of ICE or force them to appear in Court or at administrative agencies. For this reason, my administration has made it a priority to ensure that it is providing critical housing resources to this highly vulnerable sector of Somerville residents.

Jake Wilson, current City Councilor At Large:

I've found that fair housing is something a lot of people just assume is a reality, until you start hearing stories from Somerville residents about discriminatory landlords or realtors not showing apartments to families with small children.

City councilors have constituents come to us with fair housing questions, so it's critical that every councilor knows the proper protocols for reporting fair housing complaints and the resources available locally and at the state level. Every municipality has their own way of handling fair housing complaints, so it's vital that councilors familiarize themselves with the Fair Housing Commission's online complaint and referral form, the Fair Housing Commission in general, our Inclusionary & Fair Housing Program Specialist in the Housing Division, and then the Massachusetts Fair Housing Center and Mass Legal Help.

The City Council expanded Somerville's Fair Housing Ordinance during my time on the council, so candidates should make sure they are up to speed with the current ordinance and the protected classes. It's also a good opportunity to consider whether there are any additional updates to the ordinance that would make sense to consider.

As with other multiple-member bodies, I would recommend candidates attend a Fair Housing Commission meeting to see what the meetings are like and to better understand what commissioners are working on.

Willie Burnley, Jr., current City Councilor At Large:

The unfortunate reality is that housing discrimination persist throughout our nation and within our community. In addition to being based on systemic forms of discrimination, such as racial discrimination or national origin, Somerville particularly has issues where people who receive Section 8 vouchers face difficulty finding housing. This is a violation of people's right against housing discrimination based on source of income. I've also heard of families with young children being less likely to hear back about apartments. An important thing to keep in mind is that, in addition to having the law on its side, the City needs the capacity to and determination to tackle housing discrimination. This means increasing staff capacity, reviewing the annual reports that the city council receives about the number of housing discrimination complaints that the City receives, and having the administration set a plan for how we will lower the overall instances of this discrimination locally until it is eliminated. Although the council has limited power in terms of implementation and the budget, it is a powerful platform to ask questions of our staff and elected leaders to determine whether truly ending housing discrimination is a priority.

City Council candidates

Kristen Strezo, current City Councilor At Large:

It's an honor when someone entrusts their personal experiences to you. I would advise all candidates to listen to Somerville residents when they share their thoughts and concerns. These stories will help guide and shape your decisions on housing policy and more. Protecting residents from housing discrimination starts with listening, and continuing to fight for them. It puts a face to the issue that needs solving. Follow up with residents with resources on their rights.

Will Mbah, current City Councilor At Large:

I am running for a fourth term on the City Council and in my previous five and a half years, I have both advocated for the work of the Commission and conducted oversight of its operations and performance. It has been gratifying to me to observe the Commission working cooperatively with the Office of Housing Stability, which was newly created in 2018. Together the two agencies have strengthened support and protection for the city's renters and home-buyers by combining legal enforcement and legal services with financial assistance and relocation services.

The question today is whether there are additional steps to be taken to make these services more effective and to expand their reach to individuals and families, who still may lack knowledge and access. In particular, we have not yet made a decision on whether to pursue a Home Rule Petition, allowing the Somerville Fair Housing Commission to become a "substantially equivalent agency" with the state Commission (MCAD). This would give the city authority to undertake administrative and court enforcement proceedings on behalf of applicants. Now all complaints must be referred to MCAD or other legal aid or federal and state enforcement agencies, facing delays and backlogs. I would favor a City Council order that would require the Mayoral agencies to complete the study of the legal and practical questions and bring forward the text of an appropriate Home Rule petition within a six or nine month time period.

I would advise new candidates and office holders that their most important role will be to keep the issues and work of Commission routinely in their discussions of housing needs and their outreach to constituents. They should recognize the fair housing activities as an integral part of the full program of housing development, housing stability, and the programs of financial support for low income households.

Actions of fair housing discrimination are one more symptom of the high-cost, high-demand and limited-supply housing market in the Boston region. In many cases, discriminatory actions do arise from genuine bias or hostility, but many other actions are the sloppy practices of landlords or real estate professionals, trying to avoid the paperwork of voucher rentals or the awkwardness of conversations with non-English language clientele.

Thus the most effective remedies to discrimination are likely to result from the programs that expand the housing supply and the component of affordable units available on the

market. Strengthening the linkage between the services and resources of Housing Stabilization with Fair Housing investigation and enforcement should be a key part of the strategy. Similarly, the recent initiatives to amend the Condo Conversion Law should also be considered as an element of fair housing policy. It will provide a longer period of notice to tenants when a landlord/owner proposes to convert and it will raise the levels of relocation compensation for displaced tenants, in particular senior citizens.

Ben Ewen-Campen, current Councilor, Ward 3

Housing affordability is the issue that first inspired me to get involved in the local political process, and has been my top priority in office since day one. I have either led or been deeply involved in creating many laws, administrative changes, and statewide advocacy campaigns, and my experience has been very consistent: this sort of work can only be accomplished as part of a meaningful coalition. While all of us play important roles on the Council, no single local politician is a lone savior on housing issues, we can only accomplish things when we work together. We all take direct motivation from communities around the State and Country who are developing creative solutions, as well as from the talented professionals who work as City staffers and our non-profit partners, who work directly with people facing housing discrimination or other housing crises. We also recognize that the big changes we need (transfer fee, tenant right to purchase, rent stabilization) require action at the State House, and that meaningful changes there can only be accomplished with a massive and powerful coalition.

A few examples: I helped to co-found the Somerville Community Land Trust and have served as a board member ever since. But the SCLT was not the brain child of a single person, it was something that many of us in the community pushed for for years, and it began as a diverse working group supported by the Mayor and the City Council, and has always been an organization that depends on both hard-working insiders on the Board as well as broad-based community support.

Similarly, one of the issues that myself and others first ran on in 2017 was the creation of the Office of Housing Stability - which has turned out to be one of the single best decisions this City has ever made. But the idea of an OHS had already been pioneered by Boston and other cities, and of course relied heavily on the professional and organizational expertise that was brought by the OHS founding Director and many other City staff. The list goes on: always be open to learning about good ideas and ways to support them from the people who have been doing this work for years, and also don't be afraid to contribute new ideas.

When it comes specifically to how to best protect residents against housing discrimination, the best tool we have is public education. There are in fact many laws, both local, State and Federal, that protect tenants against various forms of discrimination, but all too often landlords know that residents aren't aware of them or don't know how to protect themselves. So, spreading the word about resources as far and wide as possible -

make sure that people know about the best place to contact is always the Office of Housing Stability, and that there are lots of other legal supports available (for example the Cambridge Somerville Legal Services and Greater Boston Legal Services.) Having these resources widely known in our community goes a long way to helping residents learn to identify and fight back against housing discrimination.

Jesse Clingan, current Councilor, ward 4

Listen to those most impacted—immigrants, low-income tenants, and communities of color—and let their experiences shape your policies. Housing discrimination isn’t always obvious; it’s embedded in zoning, application processes, and access to legal resources. Use your platform to fight for equity, push back against powerful interests, and make sure vulnerable residents are protected and heard.

2. Are there any institutional structures in Somerville that you feel are barriers to fair housing? Is there anything that you would like to re-imagine or update?

Mayoral candidates

Katjana Ballantyne, current Mayor of Somerville:

As we seek to ensure fair housing in Somerville it is critical that we look at ALL our programs and policies and institutional structures to identify any unintended consequences relating to fair housing. For example, while increasing the stock of new rental housing in Somerville and throughout the region and state is critical, it may also be the case that new zoning may increase the incentives for landlords to renovate and increase the number of units and floors in their buildings with the unintended consequence of displacing existing residents. We must be bold as we look for supply side solutions to increasing housing but we cannot do so at the expense of driving up displacement. Finding ways to address both the need for increased supply and to proactively address any possible displacement pressures is critical to any successful and equitable housing strategy.

We must always be open to new ideas to decrease the costs of developing new housing without compromising important labor, tenant or environmental protections. Most recently my administration hired a consultant to help us evaluate whether there are any components of our zoning, permitting and other housing development processes which could or should be streamlined to make the development process less burdensome. I am looking forward to learning from and considering their recommendations. Last, my administration has also played a key role in local and statewide efforts to enhance tenant protections seeking passage of legislation for rent stabilization, the right for tenants to seal eviction records where warranted, the formation of a state Access to Counsel program to

help undue the imbalance of power caused by disparities in legal representation, the passage of a real estate transfer fee to fund affordable housing and the elimination of most tenant paid broker's fees. In order to see "fair housing" advanced in Somerville in a meaningful way we must conceive of this concept broadly and seek bold and innovative strategies that address a wide range of "fair housing" challenges in our present housing market.

Jake Wilson, current City Councilor At Large:

From attending a Fair Housing Commission meeting and speaking with commissioners outside of meetings, I know how crucial it is for the commission to have support from the staff liaison. The turnover in the staff liaison role and the resulting vacancy periods have made it more difficult for the commission to do its work. Improving employee retention would help, and we need to make sure there's good backup coverage of the staff liaison duties in the event of a staff vacancy.

I've seen firsthand the work the commission puts into education and public awareness campaigns, particularly during Fair Housing Month each April. The City can and should lift up this work by coordinating a robust public education campaign using videos produced by CityTV, social media, and signage in high-visibility locations around the city.

Ultimately some complaints about discrimination can be difficult to substantiate. That's where audits can be really helpful. A "secret shopper" program could be the answer, where different applicant profiles are submitted for the same rental listings and then any difference in responsiveness or answers about availability are documented.

I feel like we always can do better as a city at partnering with community groups to make sure we're getting the message out about things like fair housing to all residents – and also connecting the community with the staff, commissions, and resources available to them.

Finally, it's not technically an institutional structure in Somerville, but ensuring that complaints of discrimination are investigated in a timely fashion by the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD) is extremely important. I know the Fair Housing Commission named the backlog of complaints with MCAD in their most recent annual report as a challenge facing fair housing in Somerville, and this is something I've heard about from commissioners on other multi-member bodies, as well as from constituents. So working with our state delegation and potentially forming coalitions of municipal leaders to advocate for not allowing these backlogs to occur could make a real difference.

If MCAD proves unable to take up Somerville complaints in a timely manner, I like the idea of empowering the Fair Housing Commission to enforce federal fair housing law as a

“substantially equivalent agency” to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Willie Burnley, Jr., current City Councilor At Large:

One of the key ways to follow up on reports of housing discrimination is to conduct fair housing checks. These are operations in which individuals with different backgrounds undergo an application process with the same qualifications in order to see if they are offered higher prices, are not told about certain amenities, are not given the chance to put in an offer, and overall gauge whether they are being discriminated against simply for their identity, their source of income, or (in Somerville) due to their family or relationship structure. However, during this year’s budget season, when I asked a representative whether the City currently conducts these checks or works with organizations to do so, she said no. During my time as an intern at the Equal Rights Center, a civil rights nonprofit that deals primarily in public accommodations, employment discrimination, and housing discrimination, I learned how to carry out these checks and about their utility for enforcing non-discrimination ordinances. As mayor, I would seek to either bolster staff to conduct these checks on landlords or brokers accused of housing discrimination or partner with nonprofits that could do so in order to root out these illegal activities.

City Council candidates

Kristen Strezo, current City Councilor At Large:

Quickly enacting change at the city level is sometimes hindered by having to ask permission via Home Rule Petition (HRP). I would love for us to be able to give the Somerville Fair Housing Commission more power to investigate fair housing violations like Boston or Cambridge’s Fair Housing Commissions can. While we are proactively exploring what we can do as a city in Somerville, the Commissions in Boston and Cambridge gained that ability decades ago. It may take years to win and enact a HRP for Somerville.

Another barrier to fair housing in Somerville is a lack of awareness around resources for residents. We need to make sure that Somerville residents know their renters’ rights and also, that they feel safe to report violations. Many residents may not know they have housing rights and some may be too afraid to report fair housing violations because they are afraid of landlord or management retaliation.

Some renters may be certain that they are being discriminated against, but may not know that they have rights or the ability to report Fair Housing violations—or how to report violations. I applaud the Somerville Fair Housing Commission for the work the Commission is doing.

Will Mbah, current City Councilor At Large:

I do not see the existing barriers to fair housing to be the results of overtly established structures or practices because we have already identified these and put into place the laws and procedures that have required them to change. But again, as noted above, I see the persistence of discriminatory practices as a symptom of the pressures of a tight housing market and of lax practices to avoid the tasks of careful compliance. Thus, our efforts at housing development, housing stabilization, support for tenants/buyers, and assistance to the industry to minimize burden and delay of process must work together.

Ben Ewen-Campen, current Councilor, Ward 3

The City of Somerville has made truly extraordinary progress on housing justice over the past eight years, much of it inspired originally by the Sustainable Neighborhoods Working Group and the foundation of the Office of Housing Stability, and the various laws and policies that we have passed since 2018. However, the housing crisis remains completely out of control and the cost of housing remains absolutely unaffordable to far too many residents. To be quite honest, if I was aware of existing institutional barriers in the Somerville government itself to fair housing I would already be working to change them, but I am always open to hearing feedback from residents, staff, or advocacy groups to learn how I can best support improving these systems.

Jesse Clingan, current Councilor, ward 4

Yes. We lack sufficient tenant protections, legal aid, and language-accessible resources. I'd like to reimagine a housing system rooted in community control—expanding public and social housing, supporting land trusts, and treating housing as a human right, not a commodity.

Challengers

This year, the questions for candidates who have not been elected before are:

Question 1: Have you ever seen or personally experienced discrimination in housing (either in renting, buying, or getting a mortgage)? What did you observe, how did you handle it, and how did you feel about it?

Question 2: What do you think are the most common forms of housing discrimination in Somerville?

Question 3: What is the most important thing that Somerville landlords, property managers, real estate agents, or owners selling their homes need to know to further Fair Housing in Somerville? What would you do to increase compliance with Fair Housing law?

Question 4: What do you see as the link between affordability and Fair Housing in Somerville?

Question 5: What steps would you take to continue to support fair housing in light of the Trump administration's weakening of HUD and attack on Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing rules?

Question 6: Do you have any new programs or incentives to help small landlords maintain housing?

Here are all the answers we received either from challengers or people running for an open seat:

Question 1: Have you ever seen or personally experienced discrimination in housing (either in renting, buying, or getting a mortgage)? What did you observe, how did you handle it, and how did you feel about it?

Jason Mackey, City Council candidate, Ward 5:

To be honest, I can't say for certain that I've faced overt housing discrimination myself. I've been fortunate not to have someone slam a door in my face or say the quiet part out loud. But as a gay Black man and lifelong renter, I've spent my adult life navigating a housing system where you often wonder, did that broker not call me back because of demand... or something else? That question sticks with you.

The truth is, most discrimination in housing today doesn't look like what it did decades ago. It's quieter. It's being told a unit has already been rented when it hasn't. It's submitting an application and never hearing back, while someone else does. It's resumes or rental inquiries with certain names getting fewer responses, statistically and anecdotally. It's the friend of a friend who was discouraged from applying because they had a Section 8 voucher, or the landlord who suddenly got cold feet after a tenant disclosed a disability.

These forms of discrimination are hard to prove, but they're real, and they're corrosive. They create a system where who you are subtly determines what doors open for you. And they're part of why I'm running: because housing is too fundamental a need to be rationed based on bias, assumptions, or silence.

Emily Hardt, City Council candidate, Ward 7:

I have witnessed several close friends experience housing discrimination. I have had friends have difficulty finding an apartment to rent when pregnant (in one instance) and with a young child (in another instance), which I believe to be due to landlords not wanting to de-lead their apartments. I have also witnessed friends who are immigrants and who formerly lived in public housing face discrimination when looking for housing. All these instances of injustice made me angry. No one should face this kind of discrimination and have housing be so precarious.

Michael Murray, City Council candidate, Ward 7:

I'm not aware of having ever personally experienced discrimination in housing.

Justin Klekota, City Council candidate, At Large:

Discrimination in housing is never acceptable, and I thank the Somerville Fair Housing Commission for their valuable work receiving complaints from members of our community about housing discrimination in Somerville and providing legal references to them. To the best of my knowledge, I have not personally experienced housing discrimination. As a City Councilor, I am committed to working with Somerville residents and our City Commissions to advance the cause of justice in housing, employment, City services, our schools, and beyond.

Marianne Walles, City Council candidate, At Large:

No, I have not.

Ari Iaccarino, City Council candidate, At Large:

I'm a straight white guy with amazing credit, no kids, and no prison record. So, regarding access to market-rate rentals, I've faced zero discrimination, and that's a great demonstration of the privilege I've had.

However, the one time I wanted to get on an affordable rental list in Boston, I never received a call back from the complex even though they advertised it. I qualified for Section 8, but the length of time it would have taken would have been untenable. Consequently, like most folks in this situation, I continued to send a majority of my take-home pay to just have a roof over my head since there was no other viable option.

I understand that pricing people out of cities is a structural issue and not discrimination in the legal sense, but it is one of my main focuses and something I will continue to reference throughout these prompts. There is little to no power renters have other than the hope that their landlord will be a local who doesn't raise the price on them.

Finally, being able to consider anything akin to a mortgage in Somerville is so out of my financial league despite having worked for over 20 years. Millionaires and housing lottery winners shouldn't be the only people who get to buy a two-bedroom apartment in Somerville.

Scott Istvan, City Council candidate, At Large:

An unfortunately common experience I've heard about is friends with various health conditions not being able to find suitable housing, whether that is mold free, has adequate temperature control, or properly functioning appliances. Unfortunately, requesting that a landlord take care of these issues (that are legally required) has led to landlords not renewing leases, or jacking the rent up as a form of lease non-renewal. It's frankly disturbing that landlords are shirking their legal responsibilities and causing my friends to be unstable in their housing situations.

Holly Simione, City Council candidate, At Large:

I experienced age discrimination when looking for a college apartment in Somerville. I was discouraged to apply for the unit based on my income and work history, then told the unit was taken when I applied. I was not aware that I had rights or how to ask for help.

In my role as Chair of the Somerville Disability Commission, I have had several Somerville residents ask for my help when experiencing discrimination in housing. Working with city staff and doing outreach to state agencies for legal advice and representation has shown me how fearful people are to report abuse and discrimination in housing, even when our city is supporting them with resources and holding owners accountable to the law. Marginalized populations experience many obstacles to finding a safe, affordable and often

accessible place to live. Residents should not be fearful of asking for help or reporting issues.

Ben Wheeler, City Council candidate, At Large:

I haven't personally experienced housing discrimination, but I've heard about it directly from friends. A few have told me about apartment tours where it was clear—through condescending questions or dismissive treatment—that the landlord's broker wasn't planning to send their application to the landlord. In one case, a friend worried that the broker assumed they couldn't afford the deposit because of a biased assumption about their perceived race. They left feeling humiliated, and ultimately didn't even apply. Hearing these stories made me angry, but also resolved: we need a city where people don't have to feel that kind of doubt and exclusion when they try to find a home. No one should be made to feel like an outsider in our community.

Jon Link, City Council candidate, At Large:

I come from a place of privilege. I came to Somerville as a renter and a teacher and had to scrape by for years, but I still benefited from being white, a native English speaker, having good credit, and knowing how to navigate the system. When I tried to buy a home, it was very difficult to get a loan, but I got lucky. Many others don't.

The path to homeownership and even stable rentership is stacked against working families. Large investors continue to buy up housing stock, and regional zoning restrictions have created an artificial shortage. As a result, tenants and would-be homeowners are left effectively powerless. Credit checks punish people for hardships beyond their control. Tenants are judged or exploited for speaking English as an additional language, for having a disability, or even for having a child. I've seen it, and I've heard it at doors. It's wrong.

I understand that landlords want to protect their investments, but we have to strike a different balance. These aren't abstract assets like stocks. These are homes, and people are being illegally and unfairly shut out of them.

Christopher Ryan Spicer, City Council candidate, At Large:

Last year I saw the impact of precarious housing compounded by an ICE detention which divided an East Somerville family. At the request of the remaining parent, I brought over documents for spousal visitation at Plymouth Jail. I often think of that family and the cramped basement housing conditions of their home. Some places have holes in floors, or rent dirt floor basements. Blatant code violations. If Inspectional Services Department (ISD) comes and issues a fine, it is likely a landlord may retaliate by escalating rents. So I know that dilemma of a housing ally or conscientious neighbor, whether to call ISD or

overlook the landlord's gross exploitation. Likewise, David Gibbs, Executive Director of the Community Action Agency of Somerville, during the Human Rights Commission focus group, describing the shocking living conditions of undocumented residents who are being exploited for their rent.

The second part of the question: No, I have not personally experienced discrimination in civilian housing. I am assumed to speak English fluently and to be a U.S. citizen. Like a third of Somerville residents I own housing; in my case, I am beneficiary of intergenerational wealth to do so. In fact, when I think about the offer letter I wrote to the owner about being a young family hoping to raise our kids in the schools here, I was fishing for prejudice. There's no letter a formerly incarcerated person can write that will help. And then you have the fact that a criminal record can block someone from public housing. I have seen conditions of penal housing that make me an ardent advocate for supportive housing. For instance, I have lobbied the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to grant \$9 million toward targeted housing assistance, along with a measure requiring IDs to be provided for "returning citizens" upon release.

Jack Perenick, City Council candidate, At Large:

In 2021, while helping my grandmother downsize to a new apartment, I encountered some difficulty finding buildings willing to rent to tenants they knew would have disability-related needs and require reasonable accommodation. In particular, many apartments were unwilling to answer questions about the ability to temporarily install wall-mounted grab bars or other mobility aids. We were fortunate that we were able to find a newer building which had an elevator, and ground level access that was willing to allow us to make some temporary mobility modifications inside. As a caretaker, our experience was not as difficult as it might have otherwise been. I continue to worry about disabled residents who accept housing while being unwilling or unable to risk asking about the ability to make modifications or ask for accommodations from landlords.

Question 2: What do you think are the most common forms of housing discrimination in Somerville?
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Jason Mackey, City Council candidate, Ward 5:

The most common forms of housing discrimination in Somerville are often subtle but deeply entrenched:

- Source-of-income discrimination, particularly against voucher holders, is rampant despite being illegal under Massachusetts law. Landlords may find excuses to reject applicants using Section 8 or RAFT, or simply stop responding.
- Family status discrimination also persists, tenants with children may be discouraged, denied, or ghosted, especially in multifamily buildings.
- Race- and ethnicity-based bias still shows up in who gets callbacks, how applications are processed, or what kinds of questions people are asked. It's rarely explicit, but patterns are visible to those paying attention.
- Disability discrimination, especially when tenants request reasonable accommodations, is more common than many realize.
- Anti, LGBTQ+ bias continues to impact housing access for queer, trans, and nonbinary residents, whether in the form of microaggressions or outright denial.

These forms of discrimination are hard to track because they're usually not overt. But their impact is no less real, and we need better enforcement, better testing, and a proactive commitment to equity, not just a reactive one.

Emily Hardt, City Council candidate, Ward 7:

As noted above, I believe that discrimination based on skin color, national origin, and having young children are quite common. In addition, I think people with disabilities and seniors are often discriminated against, and have a hard time finding housing in Somerville where very few housing options are accessible.

Applicants using mobile vouchers are frequently discriminated against as well. As reported in the Anti-displacement Task Force Report:

“As of September 2023, data from the Somerville Housing Authority (SHA) showed that out of 1,038 mobile Section 8 vouchers issued through the SHA, only 295, or about 28%, were used in Somerville. The rest were used in other cities or towns.”

While it cannot be assumed that all of these voucher-holders experienced discrimination, that is a very low percentage who were able to find housing in Somerville and it suggests that discrimination is at least partly responsible.

Michael Murray, City Council candidate, Ward 7:

Here's what I think:

-Discrimination against people with children.

-Discrimination against people of color.

-Discrimination against members of the LGBTQ community.

-Discrimination against people with disabilities.

Justin Klekota, City Council candidate, At Large:

Increasingly, as housing prices in Somerville rise, lower income residents are finding it difficult to find housing in Somerville and may be encountering unlawful discrimination related to their source of income (e.g. Section 8). In addition to educating the public to combat this type of unlawful discrimination, it is important for our community to increase construction of affordable housing units and expand our definition of affordability to include middle class families as well.

Marianne Walles, City Council candidate, At Large:

I would think the most common is race, disabilities, and children.

Ari Iaccarino, City Council candidate, At Large:

I'm intentionally focusing on financial displacement as a form of structural discrimination we need to address in Somerville. And while not always legally actionable under Fair Housing law, economic displacement in Somerville disproportionately affects renters from protected classes, including racial minorities, families, people with disabilities, older adults, voucher holders, and LGBTQ+ individuals.

Scott Istvan, City Council candidate, At Large:

I'd be willing to bet that discrimination against families with children ranks pretty high given the lead laws and prevalence of lead paint in older homes in the area. Age and job/income discrimination are probably up there as well - I see a lot of postings preferring "young working professionals" out there and have heard of a lot of section 8 discrimination happening as well.

Holly Simone, City Council candidate, At Large:

While housing discrimination exists in several forms, Disability makes up more than half the complaints reported to HUD. Socio-economic discrimination of lower income minorities and people of color also experience housing discrimination disproportionately in comparison to other economic classes. There are countless examples of qualified housing applicants being denied or passed on for a more favorable candidate, leaving the prospective tenant with no option but to reside in an often-inferior alternative. For persons

who rely on mobility devices, the lack of affordable and “wheel-accessible” options are very limited, forcing people to leave Somerville.

Ben Wheeler, City Council candidate, At Large:

In practice, I suspect that the most common forms of housing discrimination in Somerville are often not overtly exclusive, but is deeply rooted in economic barriers that hit marginalized groups hardest. Overt exclusion is definitely a major problem; I’ve heard stories of bias from brokers or landlords shuffling some applicants to the bottom of the pile, including for reasons of ageism, racism, discrimination on the basis of disability, and aversion to taking applicants with Section 8 vouchers. But there are also practices that might seem neutral, but still perpetuate exclusion—like strict credit score requirements (which may not even be enforced consistently for all applicants), and demanding high upfront deposits and fees. Our aging housing stock also leaves families with children at a disadvantage because some units aren’t de-leaded, and people with disabilities such as mobility needs struggle to find options that are accessible. These overlapping barriers create a situation where, even without overt slurs or outright refusals, whole groups are systematically shut out.

Jon Link, City Council candidate, At Large:

I’ve seen it and heard from people in Somerville. There is discrimination against low-income renters, people of color, families with children, immigrants, and voucher holders. Landlords often use credit checks, income requirements, and informal bias to exclude tenants, especially those with Section 8. These practices reinforce racial and economic segregation. We need stronger enforcement, more affordable housing, more public housing, and stronger tenant protections.

Christopher Ryan Spicer, City Council candidate, At Large:

In the 2017 Somerville Housing Assessment 44% surveyed said arrest record was cause of discrimination. Housing discrimination is most often seen in exclusionary practice: what happens when background and credit checks are used in the criterion of ‘good’ tenants. Broker services to find ‘ideal’ renters make automatic exclusion of potential tenants with vouchers.

66% said race. In the 2021 Housing Assessment, it was reported anecdotally that many long-term Somerville landlords who bought their properties decades ago tend to use informal, limited networks to fill vacant units. Such owners for the most part are white. Fair Housing law extends recourse to those who have experienced discrimination members of protected classes race/color and/or country of origin. So we have to ask why the City’s

Latino population is particularly concentrated in portions of East Somerville and Magoun Square.

44% said disability. Fair Housing Law, Massachusetts. General Law chapter 151B is the state Fair Housing Act which prohibits housing discrimination on the basis of race, color, religious creed, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, age, children, ancestry, marital status, veteran status, public assistance recipient, gender identity, genetic information or physical or mental disability. Beyond the Americans Disabilities Act of 1990 which included persons living with a disability as a protected class, The Fair Housing Act of 1968 sets most private housing requirements for accessibility. In Somerville, the stock of accessible housing is extremely limited because of a lack of zoning incentives.

Discrimination in Somerville because of presence of children in household is also common. The realtor doesn't want to hear if someone is pregnant. Families with young children don't get rental applications accepted because of aging housing and lead remediation. The \$1500 Massachusetts Lead Paint Removal Tax Credit was designed to improve compliance with Fair Housing law, because many landlords refused to take applicants with children under six. Family or relationship structure was added in 2023 to protected classes in Somerville and does not fall under the jurisdiction of Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD) but may appear in the forthcoming assessment.

Seniors are discriminated against in housing when renting, buying or securing finance for their home. Poor elders are most likely to miss rent and tax payments, making them subject to 'just-cause' eviction.

General unaffordability is a structural barrier. For instance, in 2021, there were 4960 households carrying extreme housing cost burdens with below 30 percent Area Median Income (AMI). The trend of that burden on the poorest was increasing, but we await update from the forthcoming 2025 Housing Needs assessment. The forthcoming 2025 Feasibility Study was required to "determine how and under what conditions the City could create units targeted to residents at 30% of AMI and what tradeoffs or additional resources would be necessary to allow projects to be financially feasible with this requirement. What tradeoffs or resources would be necessary for 10% of units be affordable to those at 30% AMI without reducing number of units in other tiers."

As listed above, in Massachusetts, it is illegal to discriminate on the basis of source of income (section 8 or receipt of public assistance or hourly wage). Only 28% of section 8

mobile vouchers were used in Somerville, as of Sept. 2023 data from Somerville Housing Authority. Discussing this finding, The Anti-Displacement Task Force report validated the assumption the rest were used in other cities and towns because while there is a limited amount of time that they must be applied, they were unlikely to find Somerville landlords who would rent to them, and if they had tried and failed to find housing those rejections were discriminatory. However, none of the four backlogged Somerville cases filed at MCAD as of January 2024 involved discrimination based on source of income.

Complainants can seek injunctive relief with Suffolk Law School's Housing Discrimination Testing Program. Under existing contract with the City of Somerville, De Novo Center for Justice and Healing can represent tenants in fair housing cases. And the City's Housing Division can provide informal advocacy. The Affordable Homes Act signed into law July 2024 created an Office of Fair Housing.

Jack Perenick, City Council candidate, At Large:

Many of my friends and coworkers have been subject to age-based discrimination in renting. I suspect given Somerville's younger-than-average population, many students, and young renters are frequently exposed to discrimination in leasing. As an immigrant community, I fear we also have many neighbors who are discriminated against on the basis of their non-citizenship status or national origin. My understanding is that discrimination against Section 8 voucher holders, is in Somerville, as it is nationwide, is prevalent and pervasive. My own experience has taught me that many landlords, intentionally or not, discriminate against those with recognized disabilities, in particular those that might require improvements to the property.

Question 3: What is the most important thing that Somerville landlords, property managers, real estate agents, or owners selling their homes need to know to further Fair Housing in Somerville? What would you do to increase compliance with Fair Housing law?

Jason Mackey, City Council candidate, Ward 5:

The most important thing housing providers in Somerville need to know is that Fair Housing isn't just a legal obligation, it's a moral one. Housing shapes people's lives, opportunities, and futures. The choices landlords and brokers make can either open doors or quietly shut them. To increase compliance:

- Education: I support a city run Fair Housing certification for landlords and brokers, particularly those managing fewer than six units. Many aren't aware of the full scope of their obligations.
- Testing and enforcement: The city should invest more in paired testing, data collection, and field investigations. If we're serious about enforcement, we need to act on patterns, not just individual complaints.
- Tenant awareness: Knowledge is power. I would expand outreach so renters, especially immigrants, young people, and low-income households, know their rights and how to assert them.
- Transparency in listings: Require Fair Housing disclaimers and anti, discrimination information in all online and physical rental ads posted within Somerville.

Fair Housing isn't about checking a box. It's about making sure that who you are doesn't dictate where you can live.

Emily Hardt, City Council candidate, Ward 7:

I would increase education and raise awareness about both the protected classes and the severity and impact of violations of Fair Housing law. The classes of people who are protected under Fair Housing law is the most important information for landlords, property managers, real estate agents and home sellers to have. They also need to know that housing discrimination is extremely harmful to people and there are consequences for violating the law.

Michael Murray, City Council candidate, Ward 7:

It's important that The Fair Housing Commission take an active role, promoting non-discrimination, and responding to discrimination complaints.

Justin Klekota, City Council candidate, At Large:

State and Federal Fair Housing Law prohibits discrimination based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity, military status, age (except minors), sexual orientation, family status (e.g. have children), source of income (e.g. Section 8), disability, marital status, genetic information, and ancestry. As a City Councilor, I am committed to working with the Somerville Fair Housing Commission and funding its educational outreach efforts to landlords, property managers, real estate agents & owners as well as to residents to know their rights.

Marianne Walles, City Council candidate, At Large:

To further Fair Housing compliance we need to continue to education landlords, property managers, and tenants. I find that more outreach opportunities to engage in conversations can help build better compliance.

Ari Iaccarino, City Council candidate, At Large:

Rental housing is a business, an investment, and this business happens within an ecosystem of laws created by people. Interested parties, specifically large landlords and property management companies, must recognize that the housing crisis has been exacerbated by their monopolies on homes and lobbying at local and state levels. The public is demanding a stronger culture of compliance and accountability, so they should not be surprised at increasing pressure on them to follow Fair Housing and adapt to a slew of renter protections.

I would require new landlords and property managers to take a mandatory Fair Housing 101 course in order to be certified to do business in Somerville. I would use my M.Ed. to help refine the course if needed alongside housing advocates and real estate professionals. I would also support a volunteer-led city-wide audit program of “secret shoppers” to test for Fair Housing compliance in an effort to enhance accountability.

I will fight to keep as many Somervillians in Somerville as possible through an increase of renter protections and enforcement. Additionally, I want small, local landlords who are doing good by their renters by following the law and keeping rates stable to be eligible for grant money that would de-lead and enhance safety at their properties.

Scott Istvan, City Council candidate, At Large:

For landlords, agents, and owners, we need to make sure education is available and accessible about their responsibilities. I’m excited about the rental registry that was recently passed in Somerville. Being able to identify rental properties and their landlords more easily will make distributing educational material easier.

We also need to provide more education and support to tenants and prospective buyers. The Office of Housing Stability has helped with this; I’d love to see them get more resources to expand their coverage. I’d particularly be interested in getting residents access to free/city-funded legal aid.

Holly Simione, City Council candidate, At Large:

Somerville landlords and property owners need to understand the goal of public and elected officials is to promote and expand affordable housing opportunities throughout the City, and they will realize ample profit margins working within these parameters. The reason we have such interest from property managers and developers is the exploding real estate values that we have experienced in the past and will continue to experience for the foreseeable future. We must ensure the Somerville Fair Housing Commission is staffed and funded properly to continue the good work they do educating and enforcing these laws.

Discrimination in housing based on race or color, religion, sex, national origin, familial status, or disability is a civil rights violation that will not be tolerated. I would ensure the process to report any such discrimination is accessible to all, kept private and investigated swiftly. I would also ensure all city staff receive annual training from certified resources and ask that all developers ensure their staff are also trained each year.

Ben Wheeler, City Council candidate, At Large:

First, landlords, property managers, real estate agents, or owners selling their homes need to understand that Fair Housing isn't optional or symbolic—it's enforceable law. Education is key: I would support proactive workshops and multilingual materials that make Fair Housing obligations unmistakable. But education alone isn't enough. We should strengthen enforcement—supporting the Fair Housing Commission's authority, and resourcing the Office of Housing Stability and Inspectional Services to respond swiftly to violations. We should ensure that the "Notice of Rights and Resources at the Start of Tenancy" provided to tenants is as clear and complete as possible, and expand or revise it in response to patterns of need; and we should make sure we are making public reporting tools known and accessible to tenants, so that they can recognize common problems and know where to go to report them swiftly. Compliance shouldn't depend on tenants having the resources to sue—it should be actively monitored and enforced by the city.

Jon Link, City Council candidate, At Large:

Honestly, they just need to know the facts. Many landlords aren't aware that any form of discrimination based on race, income, family status, disability, or voucher use is illegal. To increase compliance, I'd support real penalties for violators and better tenant education and advocacy. We also have some models for making better, more affordable housing, like

the community land trusts (shout out to the Somerville Community Land Trust), social housing, and other models that take some of our city's housing out of the speculative market and put it under community control and make it permanently affordable.

Christopher Ryan Spicer, City Council candidate, At Large:

First, SomerVIP (Voucher Incentive Program) offers one time incentive payments, money for necessary repairs, and technical support to landlords and realtors who lease Somerville properties for the first time to Somerville residents holding vouchers and other mobile tenant-based programs. Second, Landlord tenant mediation and foreclosure prevention is available through the Somerville Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development. Third, Fair Housing in Somerville depends on equal access to the market, something many unintentionally blockade. Equal access to housing accommodations, facilities, services and financial aid depends on sec 7-42 enforcement powers ordained to the Fair Housing Commission, an effort I will continue to support and expand if elected. I would support a strengthened Fair Housing Commission to both investigate complaints and enforce penalties on findings of discrimination.

Jack Perenick, City Council candidate, At Large:

While we usually think about discrimination in terms of denial of housing, price discrimination and discrimination in the terms of a tenancy agreement are also common. It's critical we ensure that all people have equal access to fair market prices for housing in our city. In particular, price point discrimination is critical to deflating our rental market. Increasingly, this will mean a regulation of pricing software and AI in addition to traditional forms of discriminatory practices.

<p>Question 4: What do you see as the link between affordability and Fair Housing in Somerville?</p>
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Jason Mackey, City Council candidate, Ward 5:

Affordability and Fair Housing are inseparable. When housing becomes unaffordable, it's not just a market failure, it's a civil rights issue. As interim, Chair of the Somerville Human Rights Commission, I've seen how the rising cost of housing disproportionately harms communities already facing systemic barriers, Black and Brown residents, immigrants, people with disabilities, and working, class families. These are the very people Fair Housing

laws are designed to protect. But when rent becomes unattainable, it doesn't matter what the law says, displacement wins. As a renter myself, I've felt the pressure. I know what it's like to navigate a competitive market, to worry about rising rents, and to wonder if you're being quietly screened out because of who you are or how you pay. Housing bias may be illegal, but economic exclusion is still legal, and it's happening all around us.

That's why I believe we must build more housing at every level, deeply affordable, workforce, and market, rate. The solution to our housing crisis isn't one type of home or one income bracket, it's a comprehensive strategy that increases supply, protects tenants, and keeps our neighborhoods accessible to the people who make our city work.

And this isn't just a Somerville problem. We need regional solutions. Boston, Cambridge, Medford, and other neighbors must work with us to create a more equitable and affordable metro area. No one city can solve this alone, but Somerville can and must lead by example.

Fairness in housing means access. And access doesn't exist without affordability.

Emily Hardt, City Council candidate, Ward 7:

Affordability and Fair Housing are closely connected. Because housing options are so constrained in Somerville, landlords have the upper hand when it comes to determining rents AND determining who to rent to. The impact of both of these together means that our housing market is very unjust, with profound inequities based on race and class. In Somerville, because the supply of reasonably affordable housing is so limited, landlords receive many more applications than they need. This makes it hard to demonstrate that discrimination has occurred in an individual case because they can plausibly deny that their decision was motivated by discrimination.

Housing affordability and Fair Housing are also connected in that the work that promotes one often promotes the other. Organizations such as the Somerville Community Land Trust, and other programs to develop affordable housing options, benefit not only affordability but also fairness in housing. I believe that Somerville should continue and increase efforts to further both goals.

Michael Murray, City Council candidate, Ward 7:

We clearly need more affordable housing. Marginalized communities are also marginalized in the economy, so affordable housing is central toward maintaining a vibrant and diverse Somerville.

Justin Klekota, City Council candidate, At Large:

Discrimination based on source of income (e.g. Section 8) and other protected classes listed above is contrary to our law and our values as a community as it pertains to housing affordability and the cause of justice. Our housing stock should include affordable units and fair practices that make them accessible regardless of source of income and other protected classes.

Marianne Walles, City Council candidate, At Large:

Safe, inclusive, and affordable housing can help ensure Fair Housing by providing opportunities that are not covered under Fair Housing Laws.

Ari Iaccarino, City Council candidate, At Large:

Everything. Until there's enough housing volume, scarcity will be used against home buyers and renters to ask for the highest prices possible with the least amount of friction: it's basic business that's even been built into algorithms. Got kids? Risky. No kids? Better. Etc.. Discriminatory business calculations are in the interest of making as much capital as possible.

That's where a strong Somerville could come in. Housing investments do not exist in a vacuum – they're shaped by zoning, tax policy, and tenant protections. If city councilors and the mayor push for building more housing with priority for existing residents along with tenant protection programs that reduce displacement, then equity will follow, raising up both protected classes and everyone else.

Somerville should be using its leverage as an important city in proximity to Boston to develop more housing while reducing legal and structural financial discrimination.

Banning flippers, investors, and private equity from purchasing single and multi-family homes without any actual dedication to density increases is paramount to making this work.

Scott Istvan, City Council candidate, At Large:

Housing affordability is a cornerstone of fair housing - we need to make sure people of all income levels can comfortably live in our city. The fact that housing is often viewed as a commodity means income discrimination is completely accepted in housing, so it's important we work to create and maintain affordable housing.

Holly Simione, City Council candidate, At Large:

Ensuring compliance with Fair Housing makes housing affordable for all. It prohibits discrimination in housing and requires a fair and open process to ensure equity for all.

Ben Wheeler, City Council candidate, At Large:

Fair Housing protections don't mean much if housing is out of reach. Many of the groups most in need of protection by Fair Housing laws—immigrants, seniors, people with disabilities—are also disproportionately affected by high housing costs. When rents rise faster than wages, discrimination gets compounded: fewer available options leave renters at the mercy of biased gatekeepers. Expanding affordable housing—through inclusionary zoning, Somerville's investments in programs and organizations such as its Affordable Housing Trust Fund, Somerville Community Corporation, Community Action Agency of Somerville, and Community Land Trust, municipal vouchers, and nonprofit development—directly supports Fair Housing by ensuring people from all backgrounds can actually stay in Somerville. Affordability isn't separate from Fair Housing—it's a foundation for it.

Jon Link, City Council candidate, At Large:

Affordability and Fair Housing are strongly linked. If people can't afford to live here, they're effectively excluded. I mentioned some of this earlier, but it's harder and harder for working-class households and families to keep roots in Somerville. The housing market we have today reproduces segregation and inequality, even without obvious discrimination.

To advance Fair Housing, we have to continue to add truly affordable housing. That means investing in public housing, continued funding and support of our community land trust, and finding solutions to vacant properties where land banking isn't a viable strategy. The odds are stacked against us, but if we act now, we can reduce displacement.

Christopher Ryan Spicer, City Council candidate, At Large:

The link is established in Fair Housing law, Massachusetts General Law, Chapter 40B, the law that directs communities to supply affordable housing. I see the linkage in terms of human rights. People need housing. They just do. People suffering from mental illness, substance abuse, and intellectual disabilities, homeless individuals and families--all need housing and wraparound services, especially low-income immigrants. Only strategic intervention can keep market-rate housing affordable. I applaud our evidence-based approach which includes setting aside for long-term investments to steadily increase inclusionary housing. But immediately, more families below 30 percent Area Median Income (AMI) need services and support from Somerville Affordable Housing Trust Fund. More families between 30 percent and 60 percent of AMI need affordable housing period. The 2020 Affordable Housing zoning overlay acknowledged there is not enough public housing in Somerville, which fell 114 units short of the law mandated minimum

requirement. Somerville residents, unless eligible for emergency housing, cannot get priority housing anywhere outside of Somerville.

This City just molts, every house bought by a shell company with a private capital firm behind it, destroys itself to the bones, a dumpster taking up station for a year, then rebuilds, and another year goes by. The four generation family home becomes two units-- and this is what it means for Somerville to ascend the urban hierarchy--that's planned. Somerville has accrued it's educated outlook without retention. Resident's support for political process, said to be the positive side of gentrification, means looking beyond narrow interests to better serve those aging in place. The Condominium Conversion Ordinance requires a five-year notice period and housing search assistance for elderly, disabled or low- and moderate-income tenants, and a one-year notice for all other tenants. The amount of relocation assistance a landlord must provide to each tenant increased from \$300 to \$6,000. I will value the link of affordability and Fair Housing on principle. Because to deprive people of their territory, their community, and without re-placement, cannot be a process called governance of the people, for the people.

In last week of July my three daughters and I attended the State House hearing in support of rent stabilization. Should Somerville explore some method of rental control to protect the tenant but also provide protections to the landlord owner who has increasing expenses and needs to remodel and improve his rentals? The Anti-Displacement Task Force recommends capping rents subject to rent stabilization at Consumer Price Index plus 2% up to a maximum of 5%. For example, an increase of \$100 on a \$2000 rent. The Home Rule Petition (HRP) includes authorization for Somerville to grant application for extraordinary expenses like converting to electric heat pumps or deleading. Rents remain stabilized on turnover. Just-cause evictions. Rent Restricted housing with rents based on income exempt from regulation and owner-occupied exempt from regulation. If the City is granted HRP there will be further opportunity for community input on the administration of a rent stabilization ordinance.

Is Somerville an elder-friendly community? The most prevalent housing problem of the elderly is housing costs. What about the elderly disabled? In 2021 approximately 6,400 Somerville residents live with a disability. That total has dropped but those living with disability and poverty have increased. I am a proponent of housing policy rooted universal housing design, the framework for accessible entrances, hallways, bathrooms, kitchens, outlets, and plywood backing to install grab-rails. I learned about its principles from my mother, an occupational therapist, and the car full of medical assist bars. Her work carried out the mandate of the Older American Act of 1965, which provided program funds for elderly people who live in their own homes to make adaptations in the physical

environment, and the Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988, requiring physically accessible housing but only called for “reasonable accommodations” for persons with disabilities. The rent control that some Cambridge refugees remember lasting there until the 1980s, providing a means of affordability to historically marginalized people, in Somerville had been abolished in 1970. Progressive municipal agency is curtailed. The exception is provisional rent stability, won by home rule petition, allowing Somerville a role to keep market-rate housing affordable to low-income. One measure of success preventing displacement is applying such tools preventing evictions.

The 2025 Aging Needs Assessment showed that age was the highest factor causing residents to feel excluded in Somerville, followed by race. The most prevalent housing problem of elderly is burden of housing costs. One scholar (Michael E. Stone, *Shelter Poverty*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993, ch. 2) defines affordability based on whether individuals or families have enough money to pay for necessities such as child care, food or medical care after paying for housing, calculated on a sliding scale based on household size and income. The 2025 Aging Assessment reported: “Over a third of Hispanic or Latino respondents and 41% of Black or African American respondents disagree or strongly disagree that they have adequate resources to meet their needs.”

“Similarly, respondents of color cited greater frequencies of concern and uncertainty with respect to running out of food before having enough money to buy more, compared to white non-Hispanic participants (Figure 27). Only 10% of white non-Hispanic selected often true or sometimes true, and 2% selected “I don’t know” in response to the statement, “In the past 12 months, I worried whether my food would run out before I got money to buy more.” In comparison, 20% of Asian respondents and 24% of respondents of other racial identities reported this level of worry. Moreover, a third of Hispanic or Latine respondents and 41% of Black or African American respondents reported often or sometimes true. Access to food, in relation to financial security, is a concern for Somerville residents, particularly among those from a minoritized identity.”

In sum, Somerville is not securing basic protection under the law when the burden of housing is so cumbersome that food insecurity is such a major concern.

Jack Perenick, City Council candidate, At Large:

While we usually think about discrimination in terms of denial of housing, price discrimination and discrimination in the terms of a tenancy agreement are also common. It’s critical we ensure that all people have equal access to fair market prices for housing in our city. In particular, price point discrimination is critical to deflating our rental market.

Increasingly, this will mean a regulation of pricing software and AI in addition to traditional forms of discriminatory practices.

Question 5: What steps would you take to continue to support fair housing in light of the Trump administration's weakening of HUD and attack on Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing rules?

Jason Mackey, City Council candidate, Ward 5:

No matter what's happening at the federal level, Somerville has a responsibility to lead with integrity, fairness, and inclusion. Fair Housing shouldn't be a partisan issue, it's about ensuring that everyone, regardless of background, has a real shot at living in our city. If elected, I would work to ensure our local policies uphold the principles of Fair Housing, even when Washington does not. That includes:

- Building equity into our land use and housing decisions, by encouraging development that expands opportunity and reflects the diversity of our community. When public land is sold, or public funds are used, we should expect inclusive outcomes, not just compliance on paper.
- Ensuring predictability and transparency for developers, while also incorporating equity analysis into how we evaluate zoning changes and major projects. That means asking who benefits, who's burdened, and how we can make projects work for everyone, residents and builders alike.
- Investing in our Office of Housing Stability and Fair Housing Commission so they have the tools and capacity to educate, enforce, and support both tenants and landlords.
- Setting public Fair Housing goals and measuring our progress. We can't improve what we don't track. I support creating a Fair Housing dashboard with metrics on access, complaints, inclusionary units, and outreach efforts, so the public can hold us accountable.
- Leading regionally. Fair Housing and affordability are regional challenges. I would advocate for stronger partnerships across Greater Boston to share data, coordinate policies, and avoid playing affordability ping-pong across city lines.

Ultimately, I believe we can be both a city that welcomes new development and a city that fights for fairness and inclusion. That's the kind of leadership this moment demands.

Emily Hardt, City Council candidate, Ward 7:

The City of Somerville should increase its support and commitment to fair housing in light of the attacks at the federal level. I would support allocating more resources to combat discrimination, including ensuring that the Fair Housing Commission has the resources and capacity that it needs to effectively fulfill its mission. I think we can do more to educate landlords first about the laws barring discrimination and second, if this can continue under the Trump administration's cuts, that HUD can pay landlords market-rate rent when it is difficult to find affordable housing. When inspections or other additional work are required of landlords, we can direct the Office of Housing Stability to offer support to landlords.

Michael Murray, City Council candidate, Ward 7:

We need to make sure our Fair Housing Commission is properly funded and has the resources it needs, regardless of the Trump administration's actions.

Justin Klekota, City Council candidate, At Large:

Even without federal enforcement, Somerville can voluntarily adopt Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing rules and continue using HUD's assessment tools. Somerville can integrate fair housing goals into its zoning codes and publish data on housing outcomes and segregation patterns. Somerville can also partner with nonprofits, legal aid groups, tenant unions, and universities to promote tenant organizing (especially in marginalized communities) and support lawsuits against discriminatory practices.

Somerville also needs to maintain balance in its housing stock accessible to all income levels. Somerville should continue its practice of requiring 20% of units in new construction be affordable. Increasing housing prices in Somerville are also pressuring middle class renters and homeowners, and Somerville should adopt an expansive definition of affordability that also includes middle income earners in addition to the 20% affordable units defined by current law.

Marianne Walles, City Council candidate, At Large:

Advocate both at the local and state level to not allow Somerville/ MA to reduce the Fair Housing Rules.

Ari Iaccarino, City Council candidate, At Large:

The rollback of AFFH enforcement along with Secretary Scott Turner's simple self-attestation Interim Final Rule means the responsibility for Fair Housing has fallen squarely on municipalities like Somerville.

- Strengthen local fair housing ordinances beyond federal requirements to include algorithmic screening and voucher discrimination
- Continue to enforce affordable housing impact assessments for new developments
- Expand inclusionary zoning ordinances to promote economic integration; I would specifically like to see more middle-class inclusions
- Partner with community orgs to train residents on how to report violations
- Enact fines or penalties for landlords engaging in discriminatory behavior; the money would be directed towards housing subsidies for renters
- Ensure code enforcement doesn't disproportionately target low-income and BIPOC renters

Somerville can — and must — go further than federal minimums to protect tenants, reduce displacement, and dismantle systemic barriers.

Scott Istvan, City Council candidate, At Large:

Legislatively, we can expand housing protections here in Somerville as federal protections are rolled back. The harder part becomes enforcement and funding - how do we make up the funding gaps, and even expand the programs we have existing? I'd love to see the city prioritize funding the creation of affordable housing, and I'd even love to see the city get more involved in the development of housing units themselves.

Holly Simione, City Council candidate, At Large:

Federal block grants and recent ARPA funding have made possible many housing developments, where in the past the federal government was a collaborative partner with state and local government. I would lobby our state and federal legislative delegations to continue to pressure the administration to not stymie housing opportunities for political gain. I would encourage the Mayor to offer Tax Increment Financing (TIF), which is a creative public financing tool utilized by local governments to fund development projects and revitalize underdeveloped or distressed areas as another solution.

Ben Wheeler, City Council candidate, At Large:

Federal cuts to HUD have gutted key programs—slashing Fair Housing enforcement staff, repealing the Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing rule, and reducing Section 8 funding. Somerville can't wait for Washington.

We can act locally without new fundraising by:

- Enforcing Fair Housing ourselves: expand the Fair Housing Commission's authority to investigate complaints and issue penalties, instead of relying on HUD.
- Using zoning leverage: make sure that processes for permits, variances, and condo conversions include consideration for non-discrimination compliance and affordability.
- Providing direct tenant support: work towards a guaranteed tenant legal counsel program to fill the gap left by federal enforcement cuts.
- Enforcement: fully staff the Fair Housing Commission, and ensure it has the power and support to do its work, alongside legal support for tenants facing discrimination.
- Strengthening family housing protections: keep enforcing our condo conversion rules, and actively encourage lead abatement—perhaps with tax relief for homeowners—so families with children aren't locked out.

By shifting enforcement and resources locally, we can uphold Fair Housing protections even as federal supports disappear. The city should treat housing justice as a local civil rights issue, independent of what HUD does or doesn't do.

Jon Link, City Council candidate, At Large:

It's pretty clear that what gets called progressive (but we in Somerville would probably just call common sense or ethical) won't be supported at the national level. The Trump administration only wants to terrorize communities, not help them.

Somerville needs to continue to strengthen tenant protections, throwing more support into public and social housing (like our Somerville Community Land Trust). We also need to collect and publish data so that we can understand where displacement and discrimination is happening, why it's happening, and know where we can put our energy to have the greatest impact. We need a spotlight and a data-driven approach.

Christopher Ryan Spicer, City Council candidate, At Large:

A weaker HUD spells erosion of the right to housing. I see it as a matter of rescuing stranded delivery. Since passage of The Fair Housing Act in 1968 recipients of HUD funds have been required to avoid active discrimination, but also affirmatively work to undo the damage of segregation and build more inclusive communities. Here in Somerville, inclusionary housing is 15% of Somerville's public housing stock and 251 units were in the

inclusionary zoning pipeline as of 2023. On average, in FY 2023 a market-rate sold 3.6 times a comparable inclusionary homeownership unit.

To continue fair housing and prevent the desertification of the elderly it is critical to have flexible programmatic funding supporting the housing burden that falls most disproportionately on the very low income. The Suffolk University Housing Discrimination Testing program is a potential partner. Affirmative Fair Housing Marketing Plans typically provides for a lottery and active marketing of inclusionary units to households with Section 8 vouchers. Without continued intervention of the 100 Homes Initiative and the Early Acquisition Fund, gentrification of Magoun Square, Duck Village and portions of East Somerville is all but annihilating options for moderate-income. It's a new and darker day than those that closed the Clarendon Hill redevelopment, and accepted the proposed development of 299 Broadway. The rental stabilization group composed of representatives from the City's Office of Housing Stability, Somerville Housing Authority, and other actors such as the Somerville Homeless Coalition which administers eviction prevention fund dispersals. Fair Housing criterion will ensure that reductionist, income-only factors are not the only determinate of qualifying recipients.

Take a feasible program and consider the legal difference between 'may' and 'shall'. A mortgage insurance program capitalized by the housing trust may provide insurance for loans. In 2017, Somerville a similar program distributed 130 loans to whites, but only a handful to people of color. Whites compose roughly half the total number of low income persons but Shall the mortgage insurance program benefit those facing interlocking oppressions of race and poverty? Affirmatively furthering Fair Housing rules means it shall. Furthermore, as boomers seek to come back to the city while simultaneously downsizing, market predictions suggest a squeeze on housing stock, causing values of traditionally perceived starter homes to soar. We have to do better for first-time home buyers of color.

A resident I talked to blamed the fact sidewalks had not been repaired on policies supporting immigrants. When sewage overflow filled his basement and he had no recourse from the City to pay for cleanup, his response was to entrench in conservative ideas. He said, "We should only spend on what is necessary." By that he meant municipalities should divest from direct services. He echoed a politics that produced a rollback in the early 1990s. For instance, The Housing and Community Development Act of 1992 authorized spending for a service coordinator program. That sounded good, and was based on success, but in practice it meant funding was not available for direct services but only less intensive support, the equivalent of deflecting constituents to Somerville Cambridge Elder Services. The resident also echoed a challenge to Somerville Affordable Housing Trust Fund in 2019, blocking the purpose of SAHTF to provide supportive housing. In 2024, State

Rep. Christine Barber's office led a push for a Home Rule Petition to expand the purposes of the Somerville Affordable Housing Trust Fund. The HRP will allow Somerville to provide direct services connected with suitable housing. I fully agree that aging society needs suitable housing linked with services.

HUD never fully took on responsibilities for assisting residents aging stay in place. A commonly expressed goal of older adults is to remain living in their own homes for as long as possible. Enjoying familiar community settings, with supports as needed, as opposed to moving to nursing homes. By aging in place, older adults can retain their independence, as well as maintain valued social relationships and engagement with the community. According to the 2023 Somerville census, there are 8046 residents 65 years and older. A third of those 65-75 remain in the workforce. Many elderly are concerned that City leadership does not recognize enough the knowledge of the city that elderly bring. With 1436 residents ages 75-84, and, 1492 residents over 85 years old, Somerville's old-old need city leadership to take a step closer to listen. I agree with residents who have proposed an elderly liaison in City Hall to help navigate. In addition, I will advocate for progressive local property tax policies, zoning, or other regulatory changes to advance fair housing goals in Somerville. For instance, I support City revenue allocation to the Affordable Housing Trust fund, such as amendments to the Article 15 of the Somerville Zoning Ordinances (Linkage Zoning) project mitigation contribution for affordable housing.

Jack Perenick, City Council candidate, At Large:

In brief, it is critical for us to signal to our community that the City and State are committed to our fair housing rules and that we will step in to fill the void created by HUD's defunding and intentional circumventing. It should be clear to residents, property owners, and all involved that the City of Somerville intends to continue in the direction we have been heading towards stronger tenant protections, and that federal actions to the contrary will have no bearing on our intentions or efforts.

Question 6: Do you have any new programs or incentives to help small landlords maintain housing?

Jason Mackey, City Council candidate, Ward 5:

Yes. I believe small landlords, especially owner-occupants, can be part of the solution when supported properly. Here are a few ideas I'd pursue:

- Somerville Home Preservation Fund: Provide matching grants or low-interest loans to small landlords who agree to affordability covenants, avoid no, fault evictions, and uphold Fair Housing standards.
- Technical Assistance and Legal Support: Launch free city, sponsored clinics to

help small landlords understand Fair Housing law, access financial tools, and navigate city processes without resorting to evictions.

- **Property Tax Incentives for Affordability:** Explore abatements or deferrals for landlords who maintain below, market rents, accept vouchers, or stabilize long term tenants.
- **Landlord Education and Certification:** Create an optional “Good Landlord” program that offers faster permitting or other perks to landlords who complete training, maintain affordability, and comply with housing law.
- **Explore expanded property tax relief for senior homeowners, especially those on fixed incomes who are at risk of displacement.** This could include increased exemptions, tax deferrals, or in some cases, full elimination of property taxes for qualifying elderly residents who meet affordability thresholds.

The goal is not to subsidize bad actors, but to help responsible small landlords stay in the game, keep tenants housed, and prevent turnover to corporate landlords or speculative buyers.

Emily Hardt, City Council candidate, Ward 7:

I think the City needs to do all we can to help small landlords preserve housing. I plan to pursue a policy of tax relief for small landlords who keep rent below market rate for low income or elderly renters. I would also advance efforts to educate landlords and pursue other recommendations of the Residential Displacement Committee of the Anti-Displacement Task Force. I would work to better publicize the resources that already exist to respond to discrimination complaints and ensure that the City has enough staff to respond to complaints and carry out investigations.

Michael Murray, City Council candidate, Ward 7:

No, not at this time. I'm interested in constituents and the commission's ideas. I'm curious whether you mean keeping housing available, keeping up reasonable maintenance, or both?

Justin Klekota, City Council candidate, At Large:

Somerville has a Housing Rehabilitation Program that provides property owners loans to help maintain their properties in livable condition. Programs such as this and the right of tenants to live in well-maintained units should be included in the educational materials listed above. The Somerville Fair Housing Commission should refer complaints to the Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development (OSPCD) Housing Division to

ensure that unsafe, unlivable housing conditions are identified and remedied in a timely manner.

Marianne Walles, City Council candidate, At Large:

I would like to see money set aside for small landlords so that they can't ensure housing compliance such as ADA compliance, lead removal, etc..

Ari Iaccarino, City Council candidate, At Large:

The local landlords I've met keep prices relatively stable and only raise it when a new renter signs on for a lease. For example, I pay \$2,450 for a two-bedroom apartment; compare that to a landlord I met in Union Square who charges \$1,400, and one on Powder House Blvd who charges \$1,700. When I asked why they keep prices relatively low, they said they do so because their tenants are part of the Somerville community, and they don't want to hurt their neighbors.

Out-of-state landlords and corporate property owners do not have this same commitment or tendency.

That's why I'm in favor of grants and tax breaks for local landlords who are doing the right thing by complying with Fair Housing and keeping rent below market rate for renters.

I would also support a new tax on all landlords that charge at market rate or above and then use that money to fund housing subsidies to keep Somervillians in Somerville. If they continue to charge below market rate, then no additional tax is levied. I understand this would require approval from the State, and I am open to other ways to keep landlords from raising the rent.

For example, many owner-occupied landlords I've spoken to have seen their homes' values skyrocket because they've resided in their houses for decades and they're now worth millions. However, these landlords' incomes have not necessarily risen at the same speed, so higher property taxes are one reason they give for raising rents. I would explore a property tax deferral program that would delay property tax increase collections on owner-occupied rentals to when the house is actually sold or transferred.

I would also like to see Somerville lobby for grants that de-lead rentals with 100% coverage for landlords and provide temporary housing so that more families can safely house their children in landlord-owned properties. I helped my sister-in-law do this in Pennsylvania; I'm sure we could do it here in Somerville.

I'm empathetic to local, owner-occupied landlords who are doing their best to keep Somervillians in Somerville, and I think we have the bandwidth to honor their commitments.

Scott Istvan, City Council candidate, At Large:

Much like our residential exemption program makes property taxes more affordable for owner occupied houses, I'd love to see tax incentives extended to small landlords who are charging below market rents and don't push onerous rent increases onto their tenants.

Holly Simione, City Council candidate, At Large:

Boston recently launched an incentive program to support landlords who rent to Boston households moving out of homelessness. It provides customer service to both landlords and tenants, including education and if needed mediation to resolve any disputes, along with financial incentives to the landlord and referrals during unit occupancy. If elected I would collaborate with city staff and City Council to review the success of this project, and if we can tailor a program to fit the needs of our community.

Ben Wheeler, City Council candidate, At Large:

Yes—especially if we tie support to keeping rents stable and properties safe. I'd support programs that help small landlords access funds for lead abatement, energy upgrades, and critical repairs, with conditions that ensure affordability for tenants. We should also streamline permitting for health and safety improvements and explore tax abatements for landlords who commit to long-term affordability. These programs make housing safer, help small landlords stay solvent, and protect tenants from displacement—a win for everyone.

Jon Link, City Council candidate, At Large:

I'd support programs that will help small landlords keep units affordable and well maintained if they commit to tenant protections, long-term affordability, and non discriminatory practices. That could include low-interest loans or grants for repairs, additional help with energy upgrades or lead remediation, tied to affordability agreements. I'd also support incentives for small landlords to sell to community land trusts or nonprofit housing organizations, so we can shift more housing into permanently affordable, community-controlled hands. This goes beyond housing by the way, I'd like to see the model currently being worked out for the Central Street Studio applied to more art space as well as retail and commercial space.

Christopher Ryan Spicer, City Council candidate, At Large:

First home buyers often take on fixer-uppers. Small landlords face unexpected needs for repair. August 6th 2024 Governor Healey signed into law House Bill 4977 “An Act Relative to the Affordable Homes Act.” Now we can support landlords to make accommodations that optimize energy efficiency and weatherize their properties, sure the costs won't be offset onto tenants. Granted the City has a Climate Forward plan to address infrastructure neglect and anticipate storms in magnitude and duration we have not yet seen. Further liability is necessary to plan for. For homes vulnerable to sewage overflows, Municipal assisted disaster cleanup should be ordained as authorized emergency spending.

Second, nearly a quarter of Somerville households include someone age 60 or older--and their needs for transportation and health care are changing. According to the April 2025 Aging Needs Assessment, about half (54%) of survey respondents need home repairs to continue living in their residence safely. A third of survey respondents would prefer a senior independent living community if they had to move in the next 5 years due to health or physical ability; 23% would prefer a condo or townhome. In Somerville 19 percent of men over 65 are veterans suggesting the eligibility of many for programs based on their military service or that of their spouses. The Assessment gives a portrait of anticipated demographics essential to bear in mind for any new programs or incentives:

“According to projections generated by the Donahue Institute at the University of Massachusetts, a consistent share of the older population in Somerville is expected in future decades. Donahue Institute projections suggest that by 2045, about 15% of Somerville’s residents will be age 60 or older—12% of Somerville’s population will be between the ages of 60 and 79, with an additional 3% age 80 and older.”

A local program for those aging in place has a steady population forecast. Keeping the aging in our neighborhoods means we can benefit from their varied lived experience, skills, and interests.

Somerville can ill-afford unexpected costs such as the \$20 million Cambridge recently incurred assuming demolition costs when a 66-unit condominium was deemed a threat to public safety. Somerville has not seen a surplus in several years, and tighter margins will put pressure on City Council to increase the tax base as it has through relinquishing affordable housing constraints on development. Unless we elect greater creativity. So here is my off-the-wall idea to include in negotiations for a future Community Benefit Agreement. I would love to see in Somerville a combined tool library and resource center for salvaged housing parts. Small landlords who want to maintain their housing would receive City incentive to join as members. These benefit from recycled furnishings, cabinets, sinks, toilets, tubs, doors, doorknobs--all that and more can be salvaged from homes marked for demolition. A nonprofit Carey Company Inc. which made its first home

demolition salvage using a repair-micro grant, now has been able to repurpose 30percent of demolished home property. This makes sense for our reputation as innovative gleaning residents. Somerville housing is so valuable that most owners are able to realize a return on improvements, but at the same time, in 2021, there were 4960 households owners with below 30% Area Median Income carrying extreme cost burdens. Some of these households become subject to Inspectional Services Department mandated demolitions. My idea is for a repair-micro grant to help ease the cost of making renovations for these households and ultimately that spares Somerville tax-payers.

If elected, I pledge support to increase opportunities for minority homebuyers, renters, and people with disabilities in neighborhoods where they are noticeably underrepresented. Let me share an instance that gives me hope here. As many proudly know, our local Community Development Financial Institution is the Somerville Community Corporation (SCC), which administers millions garnished in the Somerville Affordable Housing Trust Fund. Even more, grassroots power has made such change possible. Renters organized and challenged the Mayoral administration back when it had a surplus, a few years ago, of \$33 million. They figured the City should do like when they get a check, Renters put at least a third of their income down. So should the city; renters called for an investment of \$11 million for affordable housing. The City put in \$8 million. Often, being an effective City Councilor means insisting on upholding our values no matter the expected weather and applauding what is working.

Jack Perenick, City Council candidate, At Large:

In the course of my campaign, I have frequently addressed the importance of maintaining our city's existing support of Naturally Occurring Affordable Housing, usually small 2-3 unit properties that are owner occupied. In particular, my housing policies are designed to encourage longtime residents and small landlords, who usually offer below market rents, to stay in the city and continue to provide the NOAH that exists. In particular, I think further increases to the residential tax deduction would further these efforts, alongside efforts to help older residents maintain aging properties and age in place. Rodent abatement of properties is also an essential component of ensuring that valuable below market properties remain livable and a part of our rental market.