

## Candidate answers 2021, question 3

### **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?**

#### Katjana Ballantyne, Candidate for Mayor

Landlords should be encouraged to consult with the City's Office of Housing Sustainability at all times, but particularly when they are considering selling their property. Landlords and property owners must be made aware that their tenants have protections and that having tenants can be an asset. Landlords and owner who are selling should instruct their real estate agents not to give orders to vacate their apartments in order to make an easier sale. A great deal more public education must be provided on this issue.

I'll use education, promotions mailings and all methods of social media to inform landlords, owners, managers and agents about Fair Housing rights and responsibilities. I'll make sure that the initiatives of the Fair Housing Commission are appropriately funded.

#### Mary Cassesso, Candidate for Mayor

The most important thing for folks to know is that they should take advantage of the housing resources that are already available, for example, the educational materials and training that the Fair Housing Commission provides. The Office of Housing Stability is a great resource for Somerville, and the City budget should continue to fund and consider increasing funding for Fair Housing enforcement. Because unit repair requirements, including de-leading, can be an obstacle to leasing to families or to households with Section 8 vouchers, the City should do more to support property owners making improvements to get their units ready for these households.

#### Will Mbah, Candidate for Mayor

To increase compliance with Fair Housing law I will introduce a rental licensure program and make the rental process more transparent. Prospective tenants should be able to easily view complaints, lawsuits, and the history against a landlord or property manager they are considering renting from. This will incentivize property managers and landlords to follow the law when renting and treat prospective tenants and current tenants with respect.

In addition, I will fully fund and staff the Somerville Fair Housing Commission so that it has the resources it needs to minimize and ultimately eliminate discrimination in housing. I believe that in some instances of housing discrimination, landlords and property managers are not intentionally being discriminatory, but have not been properly educated about fair housing policies and what is legal and what is not. We can eliminate these unintentional instances of discrimination through improved education and outreach.

Charlotte Kelly, Candidate for City Council At Large:

I believe it's important to root our analysis of Fair Housing by asking, "Who is most vulnerable and who has power?" While landlords, property managers, real estate agents, and sellers may need to better understand the Fair Housing law in order to comply, it is also critical that tenants and buyers understand their own rights. Organizations like Community Action Agency of Somerville, Mutual Aid Medford and Somerville, and Asian American Resource Workshop, as well as the Office of Housing Stability have done incredible work to make sure tenants have access to information regarding their rights. We can still do much more to ensure that tenants understand their rights and protections and are able to advocate for themselves when necessary. As well as expand services like the Office of Housing Stability to help advocate with tenants in order to have their rights protected. If elected, I would work with the Council and the Inspectional Service Division to audit the enforcement process of health code within residential properties, in order to ensure residents are living in safe and healthy homes. I would work with the Office of House Stability to create lease templates so landlords can provide leases to their tenants that are fair and in compliance with the law. Lastly, we have to find ways to publicly track landlords, property managers, real estate agents, and sellers who discriminate, violate tenants rights, or are otherwise known to be acting in ways that are harmful and unlawful. We have to work with tenants rights groups, social justice organizations, and housing justice groups to determine what kind of material consequences entities should face who violate Fair House laws.

Justin Klekota, Candidate for City Council 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, and owners as well as to residents to know their rights.

Kristen Strezo, Councilor At Large:

The most important thing that Somerville landlords, property managers, real estate agents, and owners selling their homes need to know to further Fair Housing in Somerville is that housing instability is incredibly common. The names and faces experiencing housing insecurity are their community members, their neighbors and their children's classmates.

We need to humanize the housing instability crisis because it affects the entirety of our community. And ignoring the human right of Fair Housing distances us from the fact that Somerville, and the Commonwealth, is in the middle of an underfunded moral crisis.

To increase compliance, we need more public awareness campaigns in Somerville, and I will support this to make it happen. Additionally, I will continue advocating to increase the allocation of municipal funds and expand the number of staff for the Office of Housing Stability to ensure

that residents have access to the necessary resources. During the pandemic, for months I spoke with some of the largest landlords in Somerville asking them to work with their tenants who have fallen behind on rent and to not evict them.

This fight extends beyond Somerville. I am working alongside many housing advocates across the Commonwealth to enact support for the statewide Transfer Fee. We need more supportive House and Senate Bills that fund affordable housing, more compliance, and more education campaigns.

#### Tracey Pratt, Candidate for City Council At Large

The most important thing the above mentioned groups need to know are federal and state laws. They need to understand that their potential actions could be unlawful and carry consequences. We need to hold people in these positions accountable for their actions.

As city councilor I would support or propose resolutions for the following. I would also advocate for budget increases in these areas:

1. Both tenants and landlords need to be well versed in the law. I'd support more training such as fair housing 101. This training or some form of it should be mandatory for landlords. It can be done virtually or even by watching a video that they'd have to sign off that they saw said training and understand pertinent components of the law.
2. Landlords should have to submit an annual fair housing compliance checklist for all properties.
3. All complaints should be investigated and resolved.

#### Virginia Hussey, Candidate for City Council At Large:

Landlords and property managers need to understand that vouchers don't; make people bad tenants, and that their misperceptions can have serious effects on families who are struggling to stay in their community.

#### Willie Burnley, Jr., Candidate for City Council At Large

I think that all landlords, property managers, real estate agents, and owners must know that they are required to follow the law regarding Fair Housing, up to code for the safety and health of their tenants, and that they will face consequences from the City of Somerville as well as all appropriate agencies and governments if they do not do so. There are a number of initiatives I'd be interested in exploring in order to help facilitate that.

Under current law, landlords are responsible for giving tenants documents regarding their rights and resources when they send them an eviction notice. Although this is an improvement, I believe that all landlords should be mandated to supply their tenants with a tenants rights document and fair housing resources upon a lease's signage. These documents should include information about how to report housing discrimination to the Fair Housing Commission because, according to the aforementioned Somerville study, many - perhaps a majority - of residents do not know how to report housing discrimination. Our city should work to increase

knowledge among the general public around fair housing, including ensuring that the Office of Housing Stability can have the funds to host educational community events and facilitate reporting.

I am also intrigued by the possibility of the City creating template leases that outline for residents what is legal and illegal for your landlord to require of their tenants. This would allow residents to take note of which landlords are potentially creating unfair conditions for their tenants and then report these inconsistencies to the City. As a Councilor, I will engage the Director of the Office of Housing Stability on the feasibility of this, in addition to the feasibility of partnering with organizations that do fair housing checks so that we can ensure that our residents have a housing market as free from structural and interpersonal oppression as possible.

JT Scott, City Councilor, Ward 2:

In addition to familiarity and compliance with state and federal Fair Housing law as stated above, property owners must be aware of the Somerville Condo Conversion Ordinance which contains strong protections for renters facing displacement due to condo conversion. At the very least, a rental property registration database would provide the city a means for outreach to incoming and existing tenants to inform them of their rights. The Office of Housing Stability is doing excellent work with community partners through Know Your Rights campaigns around tenant protections, but we lack a central point of contact for people engaged in housing searches who are faced with illegal fees, unfair practices, and outright discrimination.

Ben Ewen-Campen, City Councilor, Ward 3:

For years, I have advocated for Somerville to establish a very visible and continual Fair Housing testing and enforcement program, instead of the largely complaint-based system we rely on now ([http://somervillecityma.iqm2.com/Citizens/Detail\\_LegiFile.aspx?ID=19559&highlightTerms=illegal%20housing%20discrimination](http://somervillecityma.iqm2.com/Citizens/Detail_LegiFile.aspx?ID=19559&highlightTerms=illegal%20housing%20discrimination)). Just as the government regularly sends underage “testers” to buy alcohol or cigarettes, I believe landlords and real estate agents would be far less likely to casually discriminate if they knew that Fair Housing testers who regularly out in our community.

Two other policies I will be working on in the upcoming term: I am leading the Council’s efforts to examine how we can encode Fair Housing principles in our Zoning ordinance. In particular, I believe we can create tools to encourage developers to use principles of Fair Housing in the marketing of new units, to actively recruit tenants and buyers from many different backgrounds. I am also working with community partners to create a revitalized first-time homebuyers mortgage assistance program, similar to the One+ program in Boston, using funds from large developers.

Beatriz Gómez Mouakad, City Council candidate, Ward 5:

Knowledge of the Fair Housing Law is important, but reinforcing the importance of the law to preserve and ensure a diverse community that is equally accessible to all (which is at the

heart of the law) needs to be emphasized. To increase compliance I would advocate for increase access to fair housing law information as per below:

- Clear information available to all landlords, property managers, real estate agents and owners plus homeowners, renters and buyers should be mandated during all transactions and when feasible it should be posted in a public location visible to all similar to HIPPA rights in a doctor's office. For example fair housing law is posted in a public lobby of a multi-family home or in a rental/real estate agency.
- At lease or mortgage signing a review of fair housing law with all parties involved including but not limited to landlord, tenant/seller and homeowner etc.
- Annually send all landlords, property owners and homeowners and tenants a summary of fair housing law rights.
- Provide homeowners, property owners, landlords etc with instructions and guidelines for where and how to publish notifications for home sales and rentals to ensure equal accessibility to information. Lack of information or where information is posted can lead to exclusion or limit access to some populations.
- Include a hotline for reporting cases of violation of fair housing law with the potential of access to legal services.
- Include information forums or even videos on-line explaining fair housing law.
- All information or services above need to be provided in multiple languages and include translators. This should be a mandate in the City for all Fair Housing Law information should it not be already enforced.

Tessa Bridge, City Council candidate, Ward 5:

Education and awareness building is incredibly important for both landlords and tenants to ensure that Fair Housing laws are enforced, that tenants know their rights, and that landlords are held accountable. One strategy to make sure that landlords understand the requirements is to adopt a tenants bill of rights in Somerville which clearly outlines what tenants should expect of their landlords and what landlords must do to be in compliance. To give teeth to this strategy we also need to increase enforcement through ISD. ISD can do regular unannounced visits to properties to ensure that they are up to standard and follow up promptly when allegations of discrimination are brought by tenants. Furthermore, the city can create lease templates that they require all landlords to use which outline both the tenants and landlords' responsibilities so that both parties are aware and accountable. Finally, by increasing investment in the Office of Sustainable Housing so that there are layers available to any tenants who need them when facing housing discrimination disputes, the court system can also serve to hold landlords accountable to their tenants.

Todd Easton, City Council candidate, Ward 5:

The city needs to do a better job at educating stakeholders about housing law, as well as increasing enforcement and inspectional services. Landlords and building owners in Somerville

need to know that discrimination in housing in Somerville will not be tolerated and that this is a city priority which will be enforced.

Alexander Anderson, City Council candidate, Ward 7:

Landlords, property managers, real estate agents, and owners selling their homes should be informed of the rules and regulations related to fair housing in Somerville. And, they should also be engaged with representatives of the city so they can understand the spirit of fair housing approaches and the goals of fair housing in our community. I think this knowledge sharing and engagement should be conducted in an on-going way and returned to on a regular basis to make sure the shared information and culture around fair housing in Somerville is consist for everything working to rent or buy property in Somerville.

Landlords, property managers, real estate agents, and owners should also be aware of the consequences of violating fair housing practices and be held accountable for transgressions in a way that is transparent.

Becca Miller, City Council candidate, Ward 7:

We should be asking what tenants need, and how to enforce their rights, including Protection from Evictions + Right to Counsel. We should already expect that landlords, property managers, and real estate agents know the laws around fair housing. We should require that all landlords, real estate agents, property managers, and homeowners selling their property give prospective tenants or buyers information on the already existing laws. The city should also engage in random inspections to ensure that the law is being followed, alongside increased penalties for non-compliance that cannot be passed on to tenants. We should also pass a fair housing ordinance, similar to Boston's, that includes increased inspections and requirements to comply with the law. Finally, the fair housing commission could create a template lease that could be posted online as a resource to serve as an example of what is legal and not legal to include in a lease.

Judy Pineda Neufeld, City Council candidate, Ward 7:

The best way to ensure that Fair Housing laws are followed is to make sure that both tenants and landlords clearly understand their rights and responsibilities. This must be done in a way that accounts for language and cultural barriers and reaches those without access to the internet or a computer. I have already begun this work as the lead for the Immigrant Services Unit (ISU) under the City of Somerville's Covid response. There I helped ensure that immigrant communities and marginalized folks had information on city and partner services in five languages. Members of the ISU participated in the Know Your Rights coalition led by the Community Action Agency of Somerville (CAAS) and the ISU tabled at grocery stores and city squares with information on tenant rights and the eviction moratorium. I believe in meeting people where they are and utilizing a comprehensive communications campaign in our main languages in Somerville to spread the word. Flyers, social media, town halls, word of mouth, and just plain community organizing are all keys to success in getting the information out about tenant and landlord rights and responsibilities. I look forward to the opportunity to work with the

Fair Housing Commission on this issue and will ensure the commission is adequately staffed and supported by the City to carry out this duty.

Maria Koutsoubaris, City Council candidate, Ward 7:

They are being treated unfairly with attention to the current ordinance. It hasn't been designed to assist in fair housing but to put a strangle hold on homeowners which results in a domino effect. Eventually trickling down to the tenant that has to pay in order for the owner to keep in good standing with mortgages and property maintenance. A reverse of the ordinance would release the property owners to sell or buy in a more comfortable manner which again results in no extra fees back to the city and the domino effect of a lower rental for the tenants.