

Neighborhood Community Meeting
Community Baptist Church, 31 College Avenue, Somerville
July 10, 2024 at 6:30 PM

Michael Libby, Executive Director

My name is Mike Libby. I am the Executive Director of the Somerville Homeless Coalition. I am approaching my 25th year working at SHC and serving the entire Somerville community.

Who is the Somerville Homeless Coalition?

Somerville Homeless Coalition has been serving the most vulnerable residents of the City of Somerville since 1985.

The mission of SHC is to provide homeless and near-homeless individuals and families with individualized supportive services and tailored housing solutions to obtain and maintain affordable housing. In short, our mission is ‘finding everyone a home’.

Today, we proudly provide Street Outreach to those living outside, a safe Daytime Drop-In Center, Overnight Shelter for Individuals, Housing Search Case Management and immediate food resources in the form of two weekly meals, deliveries of groceries to the homebound and a marketplace pantry. We also prevent people from becoming homeless by stopping evictions and we provide affordable apartments to formerly homeless families and individuals coupled with one-on-one support to help ensure their long-term stability. Collectively, over 7,000 City of Somerville residents benefit from SHC services and resources each year.

We are a committed and reliable community partner with a consistent presence in the neighborhood for nearly four decades. We’ve played a key role, in collaboration with the city and our other non-profit partners, in serving the city’s unhoused residents - identifying the most vulnerable individuals in our population and prioritizing safe housing solutions for them. We consistently respond to calls from businesses, neighbors, elected officials, city departments (including the police and fire departments) and other residents who are concerned about our folks who are living outside. We respond by engaging with people living under highways, in parks, in front of and in back of businesses, on the community path, at all three city libraries, in cars, at an MBTA station and near people’s homes. We are first responders. And, we are the only agency in our city that provides this vital and unique service for our local community.

We’re thankful that we’ve had longstanding support from the community, a favorable reputation in Somerville and neighboring towns, and a supportive relationship with neighbors and residents near our existing shelter location and throughout all the Squares of Somerville.

Many of our neighbors are long-time supporters of SHC who have greatly contributed to our efforts and success over the years. Our aim is to continue to earn their support by being responsive neighbors ourselves, and we look forward to their support in the future.

What is the purpose of the shelter relocation?

Shelter for unhoused, vulnerable individuals is a significant need in Somerville today. Our adult shelter in Davis Square at 64 College Avenue, which provides refuge from these streets, is our longest-operating program and has been open for nearly 40 years. It has been and continues to be the only emergency shelter in Somerville that serves males. Today, our shelter supports 12 males and 4 females. While we are very proud of this program, the fact is that in a city with a population of approximately 80,000 people, we are only able to provide 16 beds.

With this individual shelter relocation project, we have a unique opportunity to respond to a need and to expand our support of the city's most vulnerable residents, while increasing the community benefits that will emerge with a more robust care and support system for the unhoused population.

To enhance and modernize the support and services we provide to the city's most vulnerable individuals, and to help meet Somerville's growing need to find solutions to the housing crisis, we are in urgent need of a new facility.

The primary impetus for the relocation of our adult shelter from 64 College Avenue to First Church Somerville, located at 89 College Avenue, is that our current facility is falling into disrepair, with the building's very old mechanical systems becoming more at-risk of not being able to support our program. We are unable to increase the number of people we can accommodate in our existing shelter. And, we have never been able to accommodate individuals with challenging ambulatory limitations and associated disabilities. Moving out of a basement to a first floor facility will allow us to address this need for more equitable access.

To highlight the types of individuals we are helping with this relocation, we currently have three guests in their 60's, one in their 70's and two shelter guests in their 80s. Some, whose disabilities, coupled with the inaccessibility of our shelter, have to shimmy down the steep stairs to reach our facility. They and other future guests will have safe and dignified access to shelter with this relocation.

SLIDE 7-Floor Plan: We'll have an opportunity to add showers, laundry and extra bathrooms as part of the church renovations. Our current shelter has one shower room for 16 guests. This new shelter is adding three (3) shower rooms, including one ADA shower, for 26 guests. We currently have one clothes washer and dryer shared by 16 people. At this new location we will

be doubling the laundry capacity. We will also have one ADA bathroom and three other toilet rooms. At our current shelter location, we share a kitchen and other space in the basement with a very active 500+ member church congregation. Our new shelter will have a cook to prepare dinner and breakfast, without having to compete for access to a kitchen.

Neighbor Communications and timing of shelter relocation

As mentioned, our city has a homeless crisis and we have an urgent need with a facility that is in disrepair, along with capacity demands and limited accessibility. Through the availability of a unique time-dependent state grant specifically earmarked for increasing shelter capacity, we were able to advance this project and deliver a solution in a much shorter timeframe than we previously had envisioned. One stipulation of the grant is that we were required to begin using the funding by June 30, 2024, which led us to accelerate the process of our relocated shelter.

As a non-profit with community partnerships at the center of our mission, we're committed to listening to and addressing neighbor concerns. We understand that residents of any neighborhood may have questions and concerns about the presence of a homeless shelter, even if it is related to a shelter that is moving from one location to another within the same neighborhood. We understand that neighbors have concerns about the timing and pace of the process that has brought us to this moment; and, that has caused tension in some of the relationships we have built with valued members of the community we share. We also acknowledge that some community members have shared with us that they are disappointed, surprised, thought our process was not sufficient, and would have expected to have been made aware of the relocation plans with more advanced notice. And, I recognize that reaching out sooner with more proactive communication, while we were going through the details of the required formal permitting application process and before a permit was issued, is something that neighbors would have appreciated. Our plan had been to involve the community during the 3+ month renovation period to provide information on the project and solicit input around the project's scope, operations and community-building elements. We hope this meeting can be part of that community engagement process and we aspire to have productive and constructive exchanges of ideas with members of the community as we strive for a peaceful and smooth transition to our new shelter location at FCS.

Throughout the relocation process, SHC, FCS and the City of Somerville have worked collaboratively to ensure that all due diligence was fulfilled and that all processes required by the city were met as it related to any zoning, permitting or other requirements.

We began the build out of the relocated shelter and started to engage abutters about the project at the same time. The FCS location did not require a zoning variance as a building permit was

issued on June 13th under a Dover Protected Use, enabling us to begin renovations while meeting the terms of the time-dependent grant. On June 14th we notified abutters with a letter and a way in which for them to ask questions and provide feedback about the operations of the project. Renovations began at FCS on June 17th. Renovations are expected to conclude this September. The shelter operations at this new site are expected to begin approximately October 1st.

Why do we need to increase shelter capacity in the city?

SHC's services, resources and staff have positively impacted Somerville for nearly four decades and the shelter relocation will greatly enhance and add to the community benefits we provide the residents of Somerville.

Unhoused individuals are members of our shared community. They are residents and constituents, even if they can't afford housing and currently live on our streets or in an emergency shelter. The more our community can support its vulnerable members – and the more of them that SHC/FCS can support – the greater the benefit to our city.

Unfortunately, in recent years our community has witnessed firsthand the growing number of people forced to sleep outside in Somerville. This past winter a local annual homeless count determined that over 40 individuals are sleeping on the streets of Somerville on any given night throughout the year. Before COVID the average was approximately 10 people each night. Somerville's unhoused population, on the whole, has also grown increasingly more vulnerable during this time, particularly as it relates to physical health issues and aging. Tragically, one of our unsheltered clients recently passed away in his sleep on the streets of Somerville.

As part of this relocation, we have an opportunity to expand the number of beds from 16 to 26 so we can increase the number of unhoused individuals we can support at any given time in our shelter.

This will be an ADA-accessible shelter and it will help fill an urgent need to support vulnerable members of our population who have struggled to access our existing shelter.

SHC provides a safe space for unhoused individuals, ensuring they have access to basic amenities, such as a hot shower, a place to clean their clothes, a meal, a safe place to sleep, and protection from having to sleep outside all night through all extreme weather conditions, particularly the freezing cold and snow.

We know not only from our daily work in the community and out on our streets, but from speaking regularly with neighbors, business owners and city leaders that the number of unhoused

individuals in Davis Square and throughout the city has been increasing at a rapidly accelerating rate.

In November of 2022, in response to the community's need for a place for its unhoused individuals to receive more comprehensive support, SHC rose to the occasion and made the decision to open a day drop-in program in Davis Square. This program, in addition to its many supportive services, welcomes the homeless inside during the daytime so they can work on achieving their own personal goals.

Increasing the capacity and accessibility of our overnight shelter will ensure that more of these same drop-in program participants will have an opportunity to sleep at night in a safe shelter rather than on our neighborhood's streets.