

ARTICLE 13

THIRTEENTH ARTICLE

Submitted by: Chi Chi Wu, TMM7

To see if the Town will adopt the following as a new Article 3.12A of the Town By-laws:

Article 3.12A

Office of Housing Stability

There shall be established an Office of Housing Stability within the Department of Public Health, or within another Town Department at the discretion of the Town Administrator. The purpose of the Office shall be to assist residents at risk of displacement, prevent homelessness, and to develop initiatives to combat displacement. The office shall serve as a resource and clearinghouse of information for residents who need housing-related assistance and a forum for identifying best practices for combatting displacement. Potential services offered by the office may include:

- Advice and information on housing issues for Brookline residents
- Referrals to community agencies to prevent displacement (legal, mental health, social services, advocacy)
- Accessing financial assistance
- Advocacy with landlords or housing agencies to resolve housing disputes
- Case management to stabilize tenancies
- Housing search (affordable, private, public, inclusionary)
- Individual outreach to Landlords and on-line resources regarding tenant rights and housing search

or act on anything relative thereto.

PETITIONER'S ARTICLE DESCRIPTION

Renters across the country and the Commonwealth have faced tremendous challenges in recent years, such as shortages of affordable, decent housing and spiking rent increases. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, [tens of millions](#) of renters struggled with high housing costs, paying over 30 percent of their income for rent, which is considered “cost burdened.” The COVID-19 crisis only [exacerbated this housing affordability crisis](#), with soaring [rent hikes](#) and millions of households behind in rent- a [peak of 15 million people or 1 in 5 adult renters in arrears](#) in January 2021.

Here in the Greater Boston region, we have some of the highest rents in the nation - the [second highest](#), behind New York City, with [no signs of prices hikes slowing down](#).

About [45% of residents, and over half of Black and Latino residents](#), in Greater Boston are cost burdened.

As an integral part of the Greater Boston region, Brookline faces these challenges as much as our neighbors. Over [50% of our households](#) are renters. And while our median household income is over [\\$120,000](#) per year, about [10 percent of our population is in poverty](#). Moreover, [45% of our renter households](#) are [cost burdened](#). When rents become unaffordable to our residents, the result can be displacement, which jeopardizes individual households and disrupts stable communities

A number of communities in Greater Boston region have responded to the affordability crisis facing renters by establishing an Office of Housing Stability or similar municipal department. The City of Boston created its office in [2016](#), which provides assistance to tenants in housing crisis due to fire, natural disaster, eviction, or condemnation. Boston is not alone in having an Office of Housing Stability, as several municipalities that are comparable or only slightly larger than Brookline have also created similar offices:

- The City of Somerville ([population 79,815](#); budget [\\$307.7 million](#)) created an office in 2018 which is staffed by nine people.
- The City of Malden ([population 65,932](#); budget [\\$188 million](#)) created an office just this past year.
- The City of Revere ([population 53,864](#); budget [\\$241 million](#)) opened its office in 2020.

Brookline should have an Office of Housing Stability similar to our peer communities of Malden, Somerville and Revere. This article establishes such an office in the Town By-Laws.

DIRECTOR OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES REPORT



**TOWN OF BROOKLINE
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH**

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***Sigalle Reiss, MPH, RS/REHS
Director of Public Health
& Human Services***

To: Select Board
Advisory Committee

From: Sigalle Reiss, Commissioner of Public Health & Human Services

Date: May 1, 2023

Re: Spring 2023 Town Meeting Warrant Article 13: Create a new
Article 3.12A of the Town's General By-Laws to establish an Office of
Housing Stability

CC: Charles Carey, Town Administrator

Housing is one of the most important social determinants of health, and safe and stable housing is vital for individual and community well-being. The link between stable housing and public health is strong, as several studies have shown that unstable housing situations can increase the risk of chronic physical and mental illness. Poor living conditions resulting from homelessness, inadequate housing, and overcrowding can negatively affect health outcomes.

When people do not have access to safe and stable housing, they are more likely to experience a range of health problems. These problems include respiratory issues, mental health challenges, and infectious diseases such as tuberculosis. Additionally, children who grow up in unstable housing conditions are at a higher risk of developmental delays, behavioral issues, and poor educational outcomes. Stable housing is also critical to supporting mental health. For people experiencing homelessness, mental health issues often arise as a result of the stress and uncertainty of their

living situation. Access to stable housing can reduce stress and provide a sense of security, leading to improved mental health outcomes.

The benefits of stable housing go beyond individual health outcomes. A lack of stable housing can also negatively impact the broader community's health. Homelessness can contribute to the spread of infectious diseases, particularly in crowded shelters. It can also increase the burden on emergency departments and hospitals, leading to higher healthcare costs. Providing stable housing solutions for individuals and families is, therefore, critical for promoting public health. This requires a multi-sectoral approach involving healthcare providers, social services, and housing authorities. We can improve overall health outcomes and build healthier, more resilient communities by addressing the root causes of unstable housing and providing support and resources to those in need.

In their presentation, the petitioners spoke about the high cost of rent in the metro Boston area. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines affordable housing as housing that costs less than 30% of a household's income. Approximately 45% of renters are cost-burdened in the metro Boston area, and black and Latino residents disproportionately experience the burden. To help support residents in need of stable housing, communities in the region have an office of housing stability, including Boston, Somerville, Revere, and Malden. Several communities created this new office in response to the pandemic using ARPA funds. Malden, in particular, used some of its ARPA funds to partner with a local nonprofit HFI to establish their office of housing stability.¹

Department of Public Health Staff, ACPH members, and members of the public raised several concerns regarding the warrant article. In particular, Brookline DPH staff and ACPH members wondered how much this warrant article would cost the town annually. Commissioner Reiss noted the Department's plan to complete a human services mapping assessment before adding additional staff to support housing needs. The Brookline Public Health & Human Services Department plans to hire a consultant to conduct this human services assessment to evaluate the resources and services available to Brookline residents. The project will be conducted in three phases. The team will identify all available resources and services, evaluate gaps in operations and barriers to accessing existing services, and convene stakeholders to identify recommendations to improve access to human services. Once completed, Brookline DPH will have an action plan to improve access to human services, identify systems to address identified obstacles, and promote existing successful programs.

¹ <https://advocateneews.net/malden/news/mayor-announces-new-office-of-housing-stability/>

On March 22nd, the Advisory Council on Public Health held a public hearing² on Warrant Article 13 for the Spring 2023 Brookline Town Meeting. After hearing from the petitioners' and Department of Public Health staff, the ACPH expressed their support for the Department's ongoing Community Health Assessment and human services mapping project. ACPH members expressed their strong support for the intention of the Warrant Article. They were happy that the petitioners included flexibility and that it did not dictate the precise manner to accomplish the goals of addressing housing needs in Brookline. The ACPH voted to recommend Warrant Article 13 to Town Meeting by a vote of 4 in favor, 0 opposed. Roll call in favor: Natalia Linos; Charles Homer; Leonard Jokubaitis; and Andy Epstein.

HOUSING ADVISORY BOARD REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

Warrant Article 13 calls for the establishment of an Office of Housing Stability within the Department of Public Health, or within another Town Department at the discretion of the Town Administrator. The purpose of the Office shall be to assist residents at risk of displacement, prevent homelessness, and to develop initiatives to combat displacement. After a public hearing and discussion of how best to address the needs of the community with respect to housing insecurity, the Housing Advisory Board made the following motion:

MOTION for approval of a HAB recommendation for Warrant Article 13, as amended by Steve Heikin (Motion: Klein, Seconded: Jacobs)

The Housing Advisory Board recommends REFERRAL of Warrant Article 13 to the Select Board for further action as follows:

HAB concurs with the Select Board's recommendation to refer this matter to the Town Administrator. A decision will be made by the Town as to which services, if any, will be provided by Town staff or by outside service providers. The HAB also supports the use of CPA funds, to the extent they are eligible, to address the needs identified in this warrant article.

The roll call vote went as follows:

McNally – Aye, Goodman – Aye, Jacobs – Aye, Heikin – Aye, Klein – Aye, Greene – Aye, O'Neal – Aye, Blood – No

² [Advisory Council on Public Health - Zoom \(zoomgov.com\)](https://zoom.us/join/joinurl?url=joinurl)

SELECT BOARD'S RECOMMENDATION

Article 13 is a petition to amend the Town's by-laws to create an Office of Housing Stability within Town government in a department selected "at the discretion of the Town Administrator." The proposed by-law states that the office's purpose would be to "assist residents at risk of displacement, prevent homelessness, and to develop initiatives to combat displacement." Furthermore, the office would "serve as a resource and clearinghouse of information for residents who need housing-related assistance and a forum for identifying best practices for combatting displacement." The article lists, but does not mandate, several services the office could potentially provide.

In debating Article 13, the Select Board expressed support generally for the Town to provide a centralized "clearinghouse" that connected residents to existing housing-related services, and asked that Town staff increase visibility of their present efforts to provide such connections. The Select Board also acknowledged the power of the comments in favor of the article at the public hearing, describing them as a clear indication of a need for supportive services regarding housing in the community.

Some members of the Select Board questioned whether the creation of a new Town office to provide such services was necessary or appropriate, noting, among other things, a pending comprehensive inventory of social services to be conducted by the Health Department. One member raised the possibility of confusion with regard to whether the office could legally offer eviction protection or advocacy for individuals on either side of a landlord/tenant dispute.

With the above discussion, and following a prior public hearing on the matter, at the Select Board meeting held on April 25, 2023, Select Board Chair Bernard Greene offered the motion contained within these reports that would refer Warrant Article 13 to the Town Administrator to determine how best to implement the article's aims. The Select Board then voted 3-1 FAVORABLE ACTION on the following motion:

VOTED: That the subject matter of Warrant Article 13 (establishment of a housing stability office) be referred to the Office of the Town Administrator to identify the appropriate body or bodies to address the various aspects of housing instability found in Brookline, including those aspects listed in Warrant Article 13. Such bodies may include Town departments, non-governmental organizations in Brookline or in the Boston Metropolitan Region (NGOs), or federal, state, or regional governmental agencies addressing housing issues.

This referral is intended to prompt the establishment of a central point of contact within Town government to receive general inquiries, requests for assistance, or complaints relating to housing challenges of individuals and families. This referral is not intended to supplant in any way the efforts of the Department of Public Health and Human Services to identify and develop a structure for addressing human service needs, including those related to housing in Brookline. The point of contact can, where appropriate, identify

outside legal or advocacy organizations to refer any matters involving landlord-tenant disputes, but cannot provide direct advocacy assistance to parties in such disputes.

ROLL CALL VOTE:

<u>Aye:</u>	<u>No:</u>
Greene	Aschkenasy
VanScoyoc	
Sandman	

ADVISORY COMMITTEE'S RECOMMENDATION

Recommendation: The Advisory Committee recommends FAVORABLE ACTION on the Advisory Committee's MOTION TO REFER the subject matter of WA 13 to a Select Board Committee to report back to Fall 2023 Town Meeting by a vote of 14-3-1.

Executive Summary:	<p>This article would create an Office of Housing Stability either in the Health Department or within some other Town department at the discretion of the Town Administrator which would (1) provide assistance to Brookline residents at risk of housing displacement, (2) help prevent homelessness, (3) develop initiatives to combat displacement, and (4) serve as a resource and clearinghouse for residents who need housing-related assistance and as a forum for identifying best practices for combating displacement, and (5) possibly provide several other potential services to Brookline residents facing displacement.</p> <p>The Advisory Committee was supportive of this proposal but because there are so many unknowns (To what extent are these services currently being provided by Town departments? What is the extent and nature of housing displacement in Brookline? What kinds of services should this Office provide itself and what should be outsourced? How should this Office be structured and staffed? In which Town department should it be placed? How should this Office be funded, and how much funding will it need?), the Advisory Committee believes that a Select Board Committee of Town of Brookline staff and other Town residents and professionals with knowledge about housing displacement issues should research these questions and then report back to the Fall 2023 Town Meeting with recommendations.</p>
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<p>Voting Yes will . . .</p>	<p>On the petitioners' motion: Create a new Office of Housing Stability with primary responsibility for helping Brookline residents facing housing displacement but without first doing a preliminary study of the extent and nature of housing displacement in Brookline, how many staff are needed, the specific services that this Office would be providing to Brookline residents, and the costs to the Town of this new Office.</p> <p>On the Advisory Committee's motion to refer: Charge a Select Board Committee with studying the nature and extent of housing displacement in Brookline and how best this new Office of Housing Stability should be structured, staffed, and funded to meet the needs of Brookline residents facing housing displacement and to report back to Fall 2023 Town Meeting with recommendations. Because no money is budgeted for this new Office in the FY24 budget, a delay of a few months to study these basic questions is unlikely to result in a delay in getting this Office up and running.</p>
<p>Voting No will . . .</p>	<p>Result in continuing the current piecemeal efforts of some Brookline Town departments (Council on Aging, Veterans Services) which provide assistance to elderly and Veteran residents facing housing displacement, but leave other residents without comparable help.</p>
<p>Financial impact</p>	<p>Unknown, but potentially a large financial impact. A minimum of 1-2 full-time employees (or more) would be required at a cost likely ranging anywhere from \$85,000-\$150,000 to half a million dollars or more depending on the number of staff needed, the required skill set of the staff, and the extent that the work of the Office would be outsourced.</p>
<p>Legal Implications</p>	<p>Unlikely.</p>

Introduction

Background Information. The Greater Boston area has some of the highest rents in the nation, competing with San Francisco for the second most expensive city in the country for renters (New York City is number one). Brookline's median household income is over \$122,000. In addition, a significant portion of Brookline's rental population is transient, from all parts of the United States and the world, living in Brookline while attending one of the graduate or undergraduate schools in this area or as rotating fellows at medical and scientific institutions. Because they are only here for a few years, this transient population is less sensitive to pricing. As a result of these factors, rents in Brookline have been rapidly increasing, placing an enormous strain on renters in Brookline with more modest incomes, including but not limited to the over 10% of Brookline's population who are below the poverty line.

According to recent US census data, over 52% of Brookline's households are renters. During the years 2015-2019, approximately 43% of Brookline's rental households were considered to be “cost burdened” (spending over 30% of their household income on housing costs), while 24% were considered to be “severely cost burdened” (spending over 50% of their household income on housing costs), as shown in the table below.

Cost-Burdened Renters in Brookline

Table 2.4. Incidence of Housing Cost Burden							
Income by Cost Burden	Total	Renters			Homeowners		
		Total	Cost Burdened	Severely Burdened	Total	Cost Burdened	Severely Burdened
Income <= 30%	3,960	3,190	63.5%	55.2%	770	81.8%	71.4%
Income >30% to <=50%	2,180	1,360	83.1%	68.4%	820	77.4%	28.0%
Income >50% to <=80%	2,505	1,615	80.2%	18.6%	890	53.9%	28.7%
Income >80% to <=100%	1,560	800	46.3%	1.3%	760	46.1%	11.8%
Household Income >100%	14,225	5,515	9.3%	0.2%	8,710	12.8%	2.2%
Total	24,435	12,485	42.7%	24.1%	11,950	26.9%	11.0%

Source: HUD, Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy Data (from ACS 2015-2019).

The petitioners stated that they believe that in Brookline the problem is less a matter of eviction than one of voluntary displacement, in which Brookline renters are forced by increasing rents to move away from Brookline to a less expensive community. However, no data was provided.

Offices of Housing Stability presently exist in Boston, Somerville, Malden, and Revere. All but one of these communities have a higher percentage of renter households than does Brookline (52%).

- Boston (65% renters) created its OHS in 2016 and uses a fee paid by landlords to help fund it.
- Somerville (66% renters) created its OHS in 2018 and has used ARPA funding to expand its staff to 9.
- Revere (49% renters) opened its OHS in 2020 as primarily a centralized referral service. It is currently not staffed, but they plan to hire a coordinator.

- Malden (58% renters) created its OHS in 2022, but it primarily acts as an outsourcing referral mechanism, contracting its services with a nonprofit organization.

Warrant Article 13. This article seeks a new bylaw Article 3.12A that would create an Office of Housing Stability either in the Health Department or within some other Town department at the discretion of the Town Administrator. This Office would (1) provide assistance to Brookline residents at risk of housing displacement, (2) help prevent homelessness, (3) develop initiatives to combat displacement, and (4) serve as a resource and clearinghouse for residents who need housing-related assistance and also as a forum for identifying best practices for combating displacement.

As stated in the proposed bylaw, the Office also might provide other potential services as well: (1) advice and information on housing issues, (2) referrals to community agencies to prevent displacement, (2) accessing financial assistance, (3) advocacy with landlords and/or housing agencies to resolve housing disputes, (4) case management to stabilize tenancies, (5) housing search, and (6) individual outreach to landlords and on-line resources regarding tenant rights and housing search. It could also potentially help smaller landlords with problem tenants.

Evaluation Methodology/Research

- In developing their warrant article, petitioners consulted with the Town Administrator and the Director of the Department of Health and with the Offices of Housing Stability in Somerville and Malden. They did not consult with any of the Brookline departments currently providing services to Brookline residents facing housing displacement (e.g., the Council on Aging/Senior Center, Veterans Services) or with the Housing Advisory Board.
- The Human Services Subcommittee held a virtual public hearing on WA 13 via Zoom on March 27, 2023. The hearing recording can be found at the following link: https://brooklinema.zoomgov.com/rec/share/nxdgTf-Pi7rp62at5oHVPOhmLBBdv85AzEL_az7bUDgjALj0FZKN6nEI_QfUboFk.Og_hb4VGJ7HC0hv2w

Discussion

The Advisory Committee agrees with petitioners that the Town needs to do more to help residents who are at risk of eviction and displacement from their rental apartment and to provide Brookline residents with a centralized, coordinated, and guided information and referral system. An Advisory Committee Member with experience helping renters at risk of displacement spoke of the need for a central clearinghouse because the average renter, when threatened with non-renewal of their lease or eviction, may not have any sense of what to do or where to go for help or what their rights are. Codification of an Office of

Housing Stability in the General By-Laws was also seen as an important Brookline values statement as well.

However, there were many concerns expressed about creating this Office via a new bylaw when there are still so many unknowns and before key questions have been answered or even studied, including the following important ones:

- What is the extent and nature of housing displacement in Brookline?
- What kinds of services should this Office provide itself and what, if any, should be outsourced?
- To what extent are these services currently being provided by Town departments?
- How should this Office be structured and staffed?
- In which Town department should it be placed?
- How should this Office be funded, and how much funding will it need?

For this reason, the Advisory Committee believes that a Select Board Committee of Town of Brookline staff, and other Town residents and professionals with knowledge about housing displacement issues should research these questions and then report back to the Fall 2023 Town Meeting with recommendations. Because no money is budgeted for this new Office in the FY24 budget, a delay of a few months to study these basic questions is unlikely to result in a delay getting this Office up and running.

Recommendation

The Advisory Committee recommends FAVORABLE ACTION on the Advisory Committee's MOTION TO REFER the subject matter of WA 13 to a Select Board Committee to report back to Fall 2023 Town Meeting by a vote of 14-3 with 1 abstention.

VOTED: That the subject matter of Article 13 be referred to a Select Board Committee, which will coordinate with different Town departments to find out what they're already doing and what more needs to be done, explore ways to get it all into one centralized location, if possible, along with finding a funding mechanism, and then report back to the Fall 2023 Town Meeting with recommendations.

ARTICLE 13 ADVISORY COMMITTEE VOTES

Article Description	Establish an Office of Housing Stability
AC recommendation	REFER TO SB COMMITTEE 14-3-1
Ben Birnbaum	Y
Harry Bohrs	A
Cliff Brown	
Patty Correa	
John Doggett	Y
Katherine Florio	
Harry Friedman *	
David-Marc Goldstein	Y
Neil Gordon	Y
Susan Granoff	Y
Kelly Hardebeck	Y
Amy Hummel	
Anita Johnson	Y
Alisa Jonas	
Janice Kahn	Y
Pam Lodish	Y
Joslin Murphy	Y
Donelle O'Neal, Sr.	N
Linda Olson Pehlke	Y
Markus Penzel	
David Pollak	N
Stephen Reeders	Y
Carlos Ridruejo	Y
Lee Selwyn	
Alok Somani	Y
Carolyn Thall	N
Christine Westphal	
Dennis Doughty	
* Chairperson does not vote except to break a tie	