

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.

<p>Executive Summary:</p>	<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>
<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>

Voting No will . . .	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.
Financial impact	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.
Legal Implications	Unlikely.

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.¹

¹ This data also shows that nearly 30% of Brookline's home owners were “cost burdened” and 11% were “severely cost burdened” during the years 2015-2019.

Cost-Burdened Renters in Brookline

Table 2.4. Incidence of Housing Cost Burden

Income by Cost Burden	Renters				Homeowners		
	Total	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.Oghb4VGJ7HC0hv2w

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	