

ARTICLE 13

**REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION OF THE COMMITTEE ON TOWN  
ORGANIZATION & STRUCTURE (CTO&S)**

SUMMARY

CTOS is convinced that there should be a centralized and coordinated approach to assisting and directing residents who are at risk of home displacement or experiencing housing instability. However, we believe additional work needs to be done to accurately quantify the need and craft a structural approach.

This is why CTOS recommends referral to a working group under the aegis of the Town Administrator, involving the pertinent departments and, importantly, one of the Article’s petitioners. CTOS also asks for a report back to the November Town Meeting which creates a time-line requiring specific proposals and action, and it brings important voices around the table.

We believe the CTOS referral motion will produce a more thorough approach, one not done in isolation given that there are often other accompanying issues surrounding housing insecurity. One that allows a more holistic consideration.

CTOS referral recommendation appears at the end of this report.

INTRODUCTION

Where we choose to live is influenced by many factors: family, employment, affordability, and desirability just to name a few. Some of us choose to spend a smaller portion of our incomes on housing by residing in less convenient areas, and others choose to spend a greater portion for convenience and/or access to amenities. And for some, for reasons such as family or social support networks, the choice is much more complex.

Brookline is a highly desirable community, and, as such, it is increasingly expensive to live here. Many are being priced out and/or are selling out to developers who are eager to take advantage of Brookline’s popularity. It’s a vicious circle – the increased demand just drives prices up further.

This is exacerbated by the fact that we’re a transient community. Most children who enter our K-8 schools are not likely to graduate from Brookline High. Brookline’s transiency pushes up living costs as short-termers are less sensitive to pricing. They endure the expense for a short period of time. This creates a dynamic where people who want to establish roots and raise a family here are competing for housing (primarily rental) with the Harvard Medical or Boston University Law students, and the post-doc fellows at Longwood and the universities - people willing to pay higher rents for convenience during their stints here. Convenience, our public schools, and our amenities make it attractive to all, including high earning people in financial services, medicine, and the rapidly growing information and biotechnology sectors.

Real estate developers of course tend to cater to these high earning and transient populations. That’s where the money is. That makes it particularly difficult for those with low or fixed incomes, and even those in the so called “middle”. This broader dynamic puts

the housing situation of some of our residents at risk. It also changes the economic and social diversity of our community, the very fabric of our town.

In addition to the financial stress and the fear of being displaced from one's home, is the frightful and bewildering maze of navigating services, assistance, and legal options when grappling with housing challenges. This is a vulnerable population, often with other accompanying issues – job related, health issues, language, substance abuse, etc. We are often unaware of the complications in the lives of others.

### DISCUSSION

The petitioners' proposal seeks to address some of these issues, through bylaw, by establishing a new, and yet to be defined, Office of Housing Stability. This does not come with an articulated understanding or proposal for the structure or needed staffing. The petitioners' intent is to allow flexibility and discretion for the Town Administrator, with details to follow.

Clearly there is a need for a coordinated, centralized effort to provide information, assistance, and referrals around housing issues - particularly, around housing instability and the prospect of losing one's home. While we have yet to fully understand the problem quantitatively, we do have a sense of it qualitatively. We know that people in the midst of a housing crisis are particularly vulnerable, perhaps complicated by other struggles in their lives. And, we know there can be a more efficient system for the Town to provide some measure of support and guidance.

While the motion under WA13 attempts to address some of this, there are aspects of the proposed bylaw that are unnecessarily broad or vague and, more importantly, inappropriate to tangentially introduce into a bylaw. In particular, the "may" clause technically allows the Town to intercede in and mediate private contract disputes between individuals – whether advocating for a tenant, or advocating for a landlord. Formally extending this prerogative in a bylaw could potentially open the door for risk and liability to the Town, as well as claims of unequal treatment.

We know that the Town Administrator plans to establish an Office of Social Services, and recently issued an RFP for a consultant to help in that regard. Housing Stability could surely be a component of this, though there are other departments and entities involved as well (e.g. the Council on Aging, Housing Advisory Board, Planning) and should be engaged. It simply makes sense to incorporate Housing Stability into the conversation and be strategic in its placement and implementation.

### OTHER COMMUNITIES

Offices of Housing Stability exist in other communities, though in differing fashions. Boston's Office of Housing Stability is funded by fees paid by landlords (as a Town, it is unclear whether Brookline can impose such fees without home-rule legislation). Somerville has a staffed Office of Housing Stability that was created and expanded largely through the assistance of ARPA funds.

The Cambridge Office of Housing Stability offers referrals, housing and financial assistance, and legal aid, and it has full-time staff. Keep in mind that Cambridge has taxing capacity that Brookline can't even imagine.

Malden has an Office of Housing Stability that primarily acts as an outsourced referral mechanism, and its services are contracted with a local nonprofit organization that specializes in aggregating and providing services and referrals.

Revere's Office of Housing Stability is primarily a centralized referral point. While not currently staffed, they intention to hire a referral coordinator.

There is a potential for Brookline to refer residents to a variety of existing social service agencies, as well has help navigate people through the process. There is no “one model”, and work will need to be done to establish a “Brookline model” appropriate to our situation.

#### A STRUCTURED APPROACH FOR BROOKLINE

CTOS considered and made changes to the petitioners’ original language, and those changes are being offered as a separate amendment that can be voted on its own. However, in the end CTOS felt there was enough work that still needed to be done that it warranted a referral motion instead.

The nature of the problem has been identified, and the need for centralized coordination and guided referrals is apparent, and likely not just for housing insecurity.

The next step should be a thoughtful approach to creating the most efficient and effective structure for the community and the governmental administration. One that can consider the broader context of needed services and where a housing stability program would be best integrated.

This is why CTOS recommends the referral motion below. The expectation is that the next several months will allow for the full and deep conversation, one that has yet to occur, and a bit of time to better study existing models in other communities.

#### CTOS’ REFERRAL RECOMMENDATION

By a unanimous vote of CTOS,

Voted:

To refer the subject matter of Warrant Article 13 to the Brookline Select Board to convene a committee under the auspices of the Town Administrator, consisting of one of the Article’s petitioners and at least one representative each from the following: Health Department, Housing Advisory Board, Council on Aging, Planning Department; and any others deemed appropriate, to:

- propose a structure for the centralized coordination around housing stability and related services.
- make proposals leading to the establishment of a program for housing stability which, among other things, will provide a housing resource coordinator.

Resident services may include, without limitation, providing:

- Advice and information on housing issues for Brookline residents.
- Referrals to community agencies to avoid displacement, access financial assistance, or access other services (legal, mental health, social services, dispute resolution, housing search, advocacy).

This committee is to report back to the 2023 November Town Meeting.