

## Somerville Renters Forum 2021 - Housing Questionnaire

All candidates were asked the same questions. Questionnaires were submitted to the Somerville Renters Committee and CAAS on 8/6/21. The At-Large candidates forum was held 8/16/21 on Zoom.

---

Candidate name: **Virginia Hussey**

Candidate email: [virginiaatl@large@gmail.com](mailto:virginiaatl@large@gmail.com)

Position running for: **City Council At-Large**

---

1. What do you view as the greatest challenge facing low income Somerville renters in 2021, and why?

**Instability. There are not enough units to meet the demand, and if you are lucky enough to get a unit you can afford, there is no guarantee that it will remain affordable if it is not in a city or state program. I was homeless after leaving the military, and after many months I secured a VA Supportive Housing voucher (like Section 8, but for veterans), with the help of Cambridge. Somerville had no assistance for me at the time. Landlords often reject vouchers- I had to go to Stoneham to find a landlord to accept mine when I had one- and the units often don't pass safety inspections.**

**With the assistance of this voucher and an apprenticeship program through Helmets to Hard Hats, I was able to make enough money to come out of the supportive housing program. But when I lost my job due to unforeseen circumstances, I was almost homeless again, but lucky enough to be able to move in with family this time. With unemployment this high, many renters are one missed paycheck away from housing insecurity.**

2. In a city where more than half of the people rent, what housing policies would you focus on to ensure that every resident has safe, stable, and affordable housing? We are particularly concerned that the elderly, people with disabilities, veterans, people of color, immigrants, LGBTQ+, and other people with marginalized identities do not have enough access to housing in Somerville. If you are running for re-election, please share what you have already done on this issue and what you intend to prioritize next.

**This is a huge problem, and one thing we can do immediately is make sure all affordable units are inspected regularly \*and\* repaired if necessary. I am a disabled retired veteran, and when I was finally to find an apartment that would take my Veterans housing voucher, it turned out to have a mold issue. When it didn't pass inspection the landlord didn't receive rent but my son and I were in a dangerous apartment that made him sick. The landlord didn't fix the problem but we didn't have any other place to live so we had to stay.**

**To keep this from happening to others, I would work to increase the amount of financial assistance the city gives property owners to keep their housing safe enough to pass inspections, and make sure the city owned units are kept in good shape for tenants. I would also work with our nonprofit partners to reach more renters to make sure they know their rights. Having housing vouchers shouldn't force people to choose between homelessness and**

**their own safety.**

3. Far too many residents are still struggling to pay rent due to income loss during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially those who worked in the service sector, gig economy, and undocumented immigrants who might not qualify for traditional types of rental assistance. How would you support the recovery of residents in these situations so that they remain stably housed? If you are running for re-election, please share what you have already done on this issue and what you intend to prioritize next.

**We need to work with landlords to help them when their tenants can't pay rent. We also need to make sure that the nonprofit partners we rely on in emergencies like this are supported by the city so they can continue to help when the city isn't able to. Nonprofits are also affected by the high costs here, so to lose them would make this crisis even worse.**

4. Affordable housing funding is critical, but limited. Public subsidy often builds homes that are still too expensive for the people struggling the most, with 1-bedroom rents over \$1500. How would you use zoning and other city-controlled tools for less expensive homes so that affordable housing funding can support the lowest-income residents of Somerville (at or below 30% of Area Median Income)? If you are running for re-election, please share what you have already done on this issue and what you intend to prioritize next.

**We need to make sure we are using the tools we have the best we can, not give developers waivers and hold them accountable for the units they are supposed to build. Many cities offer incentives to build bigger to accommodate more affordable units, and we need to look at how that would work in Somerville.**

5. How would you protect Somerville residents, particularly renters, from displacement due to rising rents, gentrification, and increased development? And how would you ensure that new developments give the allocated number of units to low income residents, as the oversight seems to be currently lacking? If you are running for re-election, please share what you have already done on this issue and what you intend to prioritize next.

**Educating and assisting landlords who rent units, working with new developers to provide more units or financial assistance, and helping renters know how to protect themselves are all priorities. We also need to explore streamlining our application process for inclusionary units instead of a slightly different but complicated application for a lottery every time a new unit is built.**

6. The housing in Somerville that is available for low income residents -- including publicly owned, inclusionary and other types of subsidized, and privately owned -- is often full of bad conditions, and health and safety code violations. What would you do to ensure that all renters can live in safe and dignified housing in our city? If you are running for re-election, please share what you have already done on this issue and what you intend to prioritize next.

**Like I said above we need to make sure that units are properly inspected and regulated, and make tenants feel safe to report violations without fear of homelessness.**

7. Low income residents often face unresponsive or hostile landlords and property management. Some tenants who are people of color or immigrants have experienced racism and other forms of discrimination. This means that even if residents can afford to live in Somerville, they do not feel welcome or embraced here. What would you do to ensure that all residents feel like they belong in our city, are empowered to uphold their rights as renters, and are protected from retaliation? If you are running for re-election, please share what you have already done on this issue and what you intend to prioritize next.

**We need to work with the Fair Housing Commission to educate landlords so they know what it means to rent to low income people so it takes away the stigma, and also increase the help we give them to make the units affordable and accessible so they aren't afraid to work with these programs.**

8. How would you expand homeownership opportunities for first-time and low income residents in Somerville, especially for people of color, single parents, immigrants, veterans, and people with disabilities? If you are running for re-election, please share what you have already done on this issue and what you intend to prioritize next.

**As someone who grew up in Somerville, it is hard to say this, but we need to look at programs like the ones Cambridge has for new homebuyers. Right now only very rich people can afford to buy in Somerville, the opportunities people like my parents had as working class homebuyers don't exist anymore and we are losing the diversity of the city as I've known it.**

9. As a City Councilor, how would you collaborate with your colleagues on Council and the new Mayoral administration to enact more housing justice policies?  
If you are running for re-election, please share what you have already done to collaborate between both municipal branches and what you intend to prioritize next.

**I will work openly with my colleagues to explore all possible solutions to this housing crisis with an open mind, and be responsive to my constituents so they feel heard. Having been through this system myself it is important to remind the city that we are currently failing real people, and that losing access to housing is a trauma.**

10. What are the top 3 renter protections you would include in a Tenants' Bill of Rights and why? If you are running for re-election, please share what you have already done to enhance renter/tenant protections and what you intend to prioritize next.  
*(This question was inspired by Our Revolution Somerville's endorsement questionnaire)*

**-the right to safe, clean housing regardless of subsidized status**

**-the rights of tenants to report unsafe or discriminatory conditions without fear of retaliation**

**-the rights of tenants to organize without retaliation**