

How did you originally learn about the Warming Center?

During an Armory tenant meeting in December 2023, the Mayor announced that it was likely that a Warming Center would be installed in the Armory building in January. We did not hear more until flyers were being circulated in the community on January 6 stating that the Warming Center would open in the Armory on Jan. 8, 2024.

What were your negative experiences with the Warming Center?

There were many. Unfortunately a Google Form is not adequate to report everything but we do have correspondence between Armory tenants and City administration related to the Warming Center documented. In short, the Warming Center impacted the business of Arts at the Armory, and other Armory tenants in untold and irreparable ways. Especially when there was not security at the Armory, there was an ongoing issue of harassment by one Warming Center client towards our staff and clients. Also before security was present, Warming Center clients had free range of the Armory building--there was human excrement inside and outside the building, as well as drug paraphernalia, needles, lots of nips containers, cigarette butts, garbage, used personal items, etc. DPW tried to keep up with it but they could not. The Warming Center staff did not take responsibility for the Warming Center outside of its walls and neither did the City of Somerville. There was no regard for the Warming Center clients who were waiting outside for the Warming Center to open on sub-freezing days, and had to sleep next to a Performance Hall that sometimes had very loud events ending past 10pm. There was poor communication all around. Policies and procedures were changing throughout the term of the Warming Center. During the first two weeks of the Warming Center, Armory tenants were directing and accompanying clients to the Warming Center and responding to their needs. The line outside of the Warming Center was very disruptive to Armory businesses--clients got into fights, smoke, drank and damaged the grounds, including sculptures in front of the building. Arts at the Armory patrons were confused and I saw patrons get in line with Warming Center clients because they thought that was the cue for the event they were attending. We could not use the entrance/hallway that was used by the Warming Center during this period. There were issues with bed bugs and body lice, and the City of Somerville was not transparent in sharing this information with Armory tenants nor in informing us when fumigation was taking place. We had to change our contracts because we were concerned of liability related to minors outside of the Performance Hall doors when Warming Center clients were inside the building and also able to use the common bathrooms in the basement. We placed advanced calls to wedding / private rentals to inform them about the Warming Center. We don't know what business we lost because event organizers decided that they did not want to rent a space that co-exists with a Warming Center. Once security was in place, it was ineffective. Security was not onsite when needed and no emergency point of contact for the city was provided. Security was often late or did not show up and they did not enforce the needs of the building.

What are your suggestions for a future Somerville Warming Center / Cooling Center?

I would strongly recommend that the City of Somerville not be the one trying to run a Warming / Cooling Center. The City could provide funding for a Warming / Cooling Center but the contract should be fully outsourced to a non-government entity. There should be an operational and financial plan in place well before the launch of such a center. The choice of the Armory for this season's Warming Center was not the right choice. More consideration needs to be given to the context and ecosystem in which the Warming Center is placed. In the future, if investment is needed to make other spaces more suitable for a Warming Center, then planning should be done and budget should be allocated to these spaces in time for a launch. Much more planning, coordination and communication needs to happen, far in advance if this is ever attempted in the future. It should not run in a building, ever again, where active businesses are functioning during competing hours.