

Residents of this self-described ‘sanctuary city’ in Mass. take steps to protect neighbors amid ICE surge

By [Spencer Buell](#) Globe Staff, Updated September 26, 2025, 6:00 a.m.



Somerville residents have been racing to the scenes of ICE activity in the city, hoping to gather footage that can be used to alert neighbors, identify the people being detained, and find them lawyers. JONATHAN FEINGOLD/JT SCOTT/JOSH DAHL

By the time the masked agents stopped a man on a sidewalk in East Somerville, asking to see his ID, City Councilor J.T. Scott was ready.

He'd heard from neighbors that unmarked SUVs were lingering in the diverse and densely packed neighborhood, and feared they were Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents.

So he got on his bike and followed two of them as they circled the block, he said. In just a few minutes, he watched as the agents stopped in the middle of the street and leapt out of their cars. He pulled out his phone and [started to record](#).

There wasn't much more he could do to stop the ICE arrests that have been happening in larger numbers in immigrant-friendly Somerville. But in his eyes, it was something.

Residents of [this self-described sanctuary city](#) have been taking extraordinary steps to try to help their neighbors, repeatedly flocking to the streets to collect evidence.

Encounters like the one Scott had earlier this month offer a glimpse of the challenges they face in an aggressive federal deportation effort, officials say, is like nothing they've seen here before.

"Our state and local institutions are not in a sufficient posture to protect our residents," Scott said. "So community support is really the best way that we can keep each other safe."

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So far this year, there have been more than 30 detentions by federal agents, city spokesperson Denise Taylor said, citing an unofficial tally the city has been keeping, adding that most of the people detained have never been convicted of a crime. She said last weekend marked “an acceleration of ICE activity.”

ICE did not respond to requests for comment.

The city itself has held nearly 150 “[Know Your Rights](#)” trainings this year, and handed out 5,000 notecards with summaries of people’s rights if they or a neighbor is stopped.

Fliers from a group [soliciting information about ICE sightings](#) are posted on light poles across the city, group chats and text chains are alight with reports of suspicious cars, and neighbors say they’ve been preparing to keep watch at a moment’s notice.

“I think everyone is trying to figure out how to do their part,” said Jonathan Feingold, a Somerville resident and Boston University law professor, who has been recording videos of suspected ICE vehicles in his neighborhood. “Many folks are relatively new to a world

where our neighbors are being plucked off the street. You're having to learn in real time how you respond to that."

Josh Dahl's first encounter with the ICE surge came without warning.

On the morning of Sept. 20, the Somerville resident and his dog, Banjo, were making their daily trip to his local Dunkin' when Dahl noticed a commotion in the parking lot.

Agents were moving an empty pickup truck with the markings of a local paint company shortly after detaining four men who had stopped at the coffee shop.

Dahl wasted no time giving them a piece of his mind.

"Can you get the [expletive] out of Somerville please?" he yells to one of them while recording a video on his phone.

Then he called the number for the paint company to let them know what happened, and [posted the video on Facebook](#), hopeful that someone else would know how to "take the baton and carry it," he said. But the men were long gone.

Information about what the federal agents are up to can be hard to come by, even for Somerville's elected leaders, who often only have video clips and photos like these to reference as they scramble to help residents taken off the street.

"We don't know if these people are charged with anything. We don't know if they committed a crime. We don't know if they're illegal or undocumented, because they're not giving any of that information," said City Councilor Matthew McLaughlin. "We're left completely in the dark."

The city's [Office of Immigrant Affairs](#) tracked down the identities of the men who had been detained and lawyers filed petitions to keep them here, but discovered they had been moved to New York, where it is harder to get them back.

In the meantime, the work continued.

As the news of the arrests spread, a small crowd of people were pacing East Somerville's sidewalks, searching for more suspicious-looking cars in the area in what became a grassroots neighborhood patrol.

When state Representative Mike Connolly joined them a little before 10 a.m., he said there were dozens of people lining the street.

"It was very heartening to see that there were residents staked out on multiple corners," Connolly said. "We wanted to get the knowledge out so people could protect themselves from this lawlessness."

The hope, officials said, is that with a large enough crowd keeping watch, ICE agents might be discouraged from making an arrest, or that bystanders can coach a person who is being detained on their rights or help them get connected promptly with a lawyer.

Sometimes, it doesn't happen promptly enough.

Schuyler Pisha, an attorney with [Greater Boston Legal Services](#) who has been helping with deportation defense work for Somerville residents, said GBLS has, in some cases, been able to file paperwork to keep people from being transferred out of state. But ICE has been trying to stay a step ahead, Pisha said, and has been bringing people to jurisdictions where judges would be less likely to consider their requests for release.

"We're trying to get it done within hours," he said. But "you first have to know who the people [being detained] are."

Which neighbors sometimes don't.

Moments later that morning, Scott, who had been tailing the agents on his bike, sent texts to friends about the arrest he was watching in real time.

Video the city councilor recorded shows him [trying to get the man to take a walk with him](#) into a local business, where he believed ICE would be less likely to arrest him. The

man was refusing to show them his ID, opting to stay put and talk with them, and saying he had done nothing wrong.

A crowd formed just as the agents put the man in handcuffs, loaded him into a car with a New York license plate, and drove off.

“He was far too trusting of the government to care about his safety or his rights,” Scott said.

Right away, they got to work. No one got his name, and ICE wouldn’t say who he was, Scott said. All they had to go on were the videos and photos he and other neighbors took at the scene.

So for two days, they [shared video of the arrest online](#) and canvassed the neighborhood, showing people screenshots of the man, and eventually connected with a co-worker who identified him as Somerville resident Magdaleno Pineda Avelar. The co-worker contacted Connolly, who passed the information on to the office of Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley.

Last week, Pressley’s office said that Avelar has been assigned a lawyer.

In all, the people involved with the search said, more than 30 people took part in the effort to track him down.

“If not for the actions of state Rep. Connolly and other bystanders, his family would have no idea where their loved one is,” Pressley said in a statement.

“This is unacceptable,” she said.

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