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GTA

The pandemic shut down Toronto but not this soup kitchen that feeds the hungry. Now, the charity needs help

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Seema David's Scarborough soup kitchen has stayed open every day since Toronto was locked down under [COVID-19](#) rules in March to feed the community's most isolated and vulnerable.

It couldn't close, said the founder of the charity 5n2Kitchens, because the demand from hungry people is too great. And it's a demand that's increasing, she said.

"Through COVID, it's a miracle we stayed open," said David, recalling her mid-March scramble to switch from a buffet-style serving style in large rooms to now, taking on-line orders to produce individual meals for contactless doorstep deliveries — all with volunteer crews.

It was an enormous logistical task when masks and physical distancing were added to the mix, amid the urgency of delivering food to hungry people daily.

"People have to understand there is a lot of hunger around them," she said.

Each week, more than 1,500 hand-packed, freshly cooked meals and more than 400 bags of groceries are assembled and delivered by David's volunteers to seniors, adults, frontline workers and families with young children across Scarborough. Masked drivers connect at curbside or at the main floor of apartment buildings to drop off tenants' food.

David fears the hungry may be forgotten as the city reopens. That's part of the reason she is now campaigning for monthly donors while expanding the charity's programs with a focus on seniors. (One new program is the free food pantry, like a food bank, where locals make appointments to pick up perishable and non-perishable items in a newly-expanded storefront).

Now in its eighth year of operation, until now largely sustained by one-time private donations and in-kind support from organizations like Second Harvest, David said the kitchen — now simply known as 5n2 — "urgently requires" ongoing financial support to survive.

"The hunger's not going to go away," David said, taking a short break outside of her kitchen in an industrial park near Markham and Ellesmere Roads.

"The isolation (of some people) is not going to go away. Whatever (vulnerabilities) COVID-19 has created and brought to light, it's not going to go away."

David has some regular donors whom she estimates generate about \$3,000 a month, but that barely covers her basic overhead. David says 5n2's services are worth well over \$600,000 annually when all services and overheads are calculated. No one, except the head chef, is paid.

The city of Toronto has recognized 5n2's work, with Councillor Paul Ainslie (Scarborough-Guildwood) helping David secure support based on her audited financial statements.

This summer, the city approved \$99,600 in funding for food and operating costs to cook, prepare and package meals and grocery bags for delivery from the city's emergency COVID-19 relief program.

"The councillor is a huge supporter of 5n2Kitchens and Seema has done some fantastic work in the community," Antonette DiNovo said, Ainslie's chief of staff, said in an email.

"We have continued to work with Seema through the pandemic, calling her weekly to inquire on her needs and have been successful in sending her volunteers as well as the city recently approving funding."

The 5n2 volunteer drivers cover an area that very roughly is bounded by Port Union Road, north to Finch Avenue East, south to the Danforth and west to the Don Valley Parkway.

To operate at the volume it does, 5n2 relies on donated food items from grocery stores, markets and bakeries. This includes fresh produce, meats, starches, canned goods, breads, sweets and beverages. Some donations are often so plentiful, she shares her extras with other charitable organizations. Now, some of those extras are being directed to the free food pantry.

David said she will never refuse one-time donations "but we need the consistent \$100 monthly donors" to keep the kitchen afloat. She said the donations will strengthen the current programs and create opportunities for sustained employment.

In order to generate a consistent revenue stream, 5n2 recently launched a new subsidized meal program, Meals4U. It targets seniors and others who are in need of fresh, nutritious homemade meals and delivered to their door.

The free meal service will remain, for which people need to fill out an online order form.

"If I can continue to feed people and pay the chef and a small staff to coordinate the programs, that would be fantastic," David said.

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