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GTA

# This food charity has fed Scarborough residents throughout the pandemic. It needs a new home and time is running out

By **Urbi Khan** Staff ReporterTue., Aug. 10, 2021 |  5 min. read

Ripening melons, gourds and peppers glisten in a community garden beside a Scarborough parking lot. The thick green patch, grown by [5n2](#), is one of the organization's many programs to combat food insecurity in the city.

Another is food delivery. Across from the leafy garden, 5n2 volunteers crowd a large square table in an industrial unit, cutting mounds of donated vegetables to bolster meals — such as the pot of fragrant beans and sweet corn dish simmering on the stove — being prepped and boxed to deliver to seniors and families in Scarborough. Then there is 5n2's by-appointment-only pantry where clients can select free items, like kefir or canned goods, in privacy and without having to line up outside.

All these services, however, are in jeopardy.

5n2, which operates seven days a week, is facing eviction by year's end after its lease was not renewed. It's the second Toronto-based organization battling food insecurity in need of a new home; the [St. James Community Co-op](#) is also searching for a permanent site after the space it was temporarily using in the Wellesley Community Centre became a [COVID-19](#) vaccine clinic in June.

Seema David, founder of 5n2, fears she may have to drastically reduce services or, worse, close altogether if she cannot find a suitable location soon.

"How do you tell (regular clients) we are shutting down ... that you cannot come anymore?" said David, who has steered the charity for eight years, the last three out of an industrial plaza near Markham Road and the 401.

"It's going to be very hard to say that."

For 5n2 client Stephanie, her weekly pantry visits are a necessity.

"I depend on it. It's like, I have no other choice," said the senior who began using the 5n2 pantry in November at the recommendation of a community centre social worker. She takes a taxi every Thursday to shuttle the heavy groceries to her home, using savings to pay for the ride.

"If they close or they are asked to move somewhere, I can say I don't know how I would manage," continued Stephanie, who the Star is naming by first name only.

Since receiving the lease termination notice last November, David has aggressively pursued leads to relocate, which is difficult since she requires a large commercial space at a rental rate that the charity can afford.

A spokesperson for the company that leases 5n2 its current location told the Star that the lease has come to a "natural end" as it was a three-year agreement.

A realtor helped David find two units inside a city-owned property at [705 Progress Ave.](#), which is close to 5n2's current site.

She approached [long-time 5n2 supporter](#), Coun. Paul Ainslie to help advocate for her as several other bidders were interested in her “dream” home as well. Ainslie [presented a motion](#) in May to ask the city to find a long-term site for 5n2 in Scarborough no later than Dec. 31, 2021.

A decision on the property bid won’t be made by the city’s economic and community development committee until September, but expressions of interest are due on Aug. 31. If successful, the relocation cost for 5n2 will be about \$420,000 to bring the space up to code and install the kitchens.

David fears interrupting meal service, even temporarily, will distress the community 5n2 supports seven days a week.

“Stability is key for us,” she said, noting 5n2 did not close a single day during [the pandemic](#).

Suranjit, a single father of two and a chef who had to stop working last year due to health complications, says the 5n2 food pantry accommodates his diet. Suranjit, whose last name the Star is not using, said pantry access helps him conserve money for his children’s education.

“This will be hard for me,” said Suranjit on the possibility that 5n2 has to close.

“I’d be very sad if they shut down. They have done so much for the community, not only for me.”

David describes 5n2 as a type of essential service, like a first responder, whose mission is to alleviate hunger.

The 5n2 programs are funded through private donations and government grants — this money has allowed 5n2 to start new programs, like the community garden and food education sessions for seniors. David is able to pay nine staff members now, five of whom work in the kitchen and four in the office. David worked as a volunteer until this year and is now paid, but still relies on dozens of volunteers to keep all aspects of 5n2 running.

“You cannot work at 5n2 if you do not have a heart,” David said.

Still, money is a constant worry.

Keeping up with the costs of running programs and paying staff at 5n2 is overwhelming, said David — a situation compounded with the added pressure of finding a new home.

Of the estimated \$420,000 price tag on the relocation, the initial “fit-up” costs to bring the space up to code at 705 Progress Ave. would be \$170,000. After the fit-up, the 5n2 will need a further \$250,000 for renovation to build its two kitchens, install walk-in refrigeration and freezer space, and set up storage as well as offices.

A [GoFundMe fundraiser](#) has been set up by 5n2 with the goal of raising \$20,000 of the \$170,000 needed for fit-up costs. Only \$3,605 has been raised as of Aug. 9. A [petition](#) has also started to support 5n2 in persuading the city of Toronto to grant the units at 705 Progress Ave. to it in September.

David says that she has been mentally blocking off the thought of the what ifs. What if she does not find a space big enough for her to locate? What if she has to close down 5n2? David and her team are constantly seeking plan Bs. Their days are filled with meetings with private funders and the city in order to raise funds for both the site relocation and costs of daily operations.

“We’re not sitting quietly like this and saying, ‘city give us money,’” David said.

But David says that she is thankful for all the help from Ainslie and his office. She especially appreciated that during a city meeting in May, the councillor asked pointedly: “If Seema shuts down, how are you going to plug that hole?” Crushing, the city acknowledged that if that were to happen, it would not be able to meet the need.



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