

Friday, October 15, 2021

Chair and Members,
General Government and Licensing Committee
Attn: Mathew Green, Committee Secretary
100 Queen Street West
Toronto, Ontario M5H 2N2

Dear Chair Ainslie and Members of Committee:

**Request to approve 5N2 Food for All, Council of Agencies Serving South Asians,
and South Asian Autism Awareness Centre for below market rents
at 705 Progress Avenue as part of Item #GL26.7**

On behalf of the SAAAC Autism Centre, please accept this letter as our support for the staff recommendations in Report GL26.7: Community Space Tenancy Lease Agreement at 705 Progress Avenue as well as our request for the General Government and Licensing Committee to support additional motions that will help local charities serve marginalized, racialized, and underserved communities in Scarborough.

The SAAAC Autism Centre is interested in additional space at 705 Progress Avenue, as it would allow us to provide desperately needed autism services to total of 975 individuals and their families. A new space would allow us to help 575 new individuals and their families, in addition to the 400 individuals and their families that we currently serve at 63-705 Progress Avenue. Our services help racialized, lower income, and under serviced new-Canadian communities in Scarborough.

Specifically, a new space will allow our Centre to help 575 individuals and their families by offering four streams of support:

1. **Early Diagnosis and Intervention Support Services (ages 18 months - 4 years):** will serve 150 children and their families annually. The service will help newcomers and other high needs groups access diagnostic services in a culturally responsive manner. Staff will be able to carry out assessments to identify developmental red flags in young children; guide families to partner hospitals (Scarborough Health Network and Holland Bloorview) for formal diagnostic appointments; and connect families to clinical and other support services once a diagnosis has been received.
2. **Parent Skills Training for Child Development (ages 12 months - 4 years):** will serve 105 children and their families annually and teaches parents how to interact with their special needs children. This parent training focuses on targeting social communication skills. Parents will receive hands-on training on how to teach their child foundational skills: Joint attention, symbolic play, engagement, regulation.

These specific skills have a big impact and have been shown to lead to improvement in skills such as language, play skills, social skills, and school readiness skills.

3. **Caregiver Mental Health Support Program (open to all caregivers):** will serve 300 individuals including parents, siblings, grandparents of autistic individuals annually. This program is culturally responsive, peer-led eight-week group counselling program for caregivers of children on the autism spectrum. The intervention is designed to target the social, emotional, and psychological challenges that can arise among caregivers of children with exceptional needs. The primary goal of this program is to provide caregivers with a platform to share their experiences as caregivers of individuals on the autism spectrum while also listening to the experiences of others. This allows the participants to develop a sense of shared identity. The second goal of the program is to provide caregivers with knowledge and teach practical skills to support their own mental health.
4. **Goodness Gift Employment Program (ages 18+):** will serve 20 individuals annually. The primary beneficiaries of the initiative will be adults on the autism spectrum who have completed high school. The years after high school are bleak for young autistic adults. Caregivers liken it to “falling off a cliff” after their loved ones age out of their children’s system and transition to life after school - a time that has fewer opportunities to participate in the community, develop socially significant skills, or find employment. This time creates stress and anxiety for young adults and their families, who are suddenly faced with little support and staying at home. The Goodness Gift will utilize a work integration social enterprises (WISE) model to provide job training and paid employment opportunities for young adults on the autism spectrum. The program will have dual social and revenue generation goals, producing goods and services for public consumption while also striving to improve economic and social conditions for young adults on the spectrum. Clients will be trained and employed in all aspects of the organization’s operation - from order processing to inventory management to the packaging and delivery of gift baskets. Though the numbers of individuals served is low in comparison to our other programs, the impact this will have on participants and their families will be profound, helping our clients develop skills that can serve them for a lifetime.

These programs support the development of individuals on the autism spectrum at all life stages – from diagnostic support as an infant to job-readiness training as a young adult. Our programs will also focus on empowering caregivers with skill building and mental health support programs, encouraging self-reliance and self-confidence.

Collectively, these programs will support 575 individuals annually. The SAAAC Autism Centre focuses its efforts on supporting families from high needs communities and groups, who typically have a difficult time accessing autism services and resources. In addition to having a child with exceptional needs, most families served by SAAAC have challenges related to low income;

parental unemployment; low parental education; and no knowledge of official language. Such families experience delayed diagnostic support; later entry into intervention; and greater crisis situations involving emergency room visits and the justice system. It is imperative the SAAAC Autism Centre find space to extend services and relief to vulnerable populations facing multiple barriers to care.

Furthermore, we have used various analysis tools to measure the success of each of the above listed programs. We are proud to say that all evaluated programs have shown positive outcomes for individuals and their families. We would now like to scale up each program and serve more individuals and their families who are waiting for these crucial services.

Report GL26.7 recommends granting below-market rent at the City/TDSB owned 705 Progress Avenue property to Carefirst Seniors and Community Services Association charity as part of the City's below market rent program. The approval will allow Carefirst Seniors Association to utilize approximately 6,600 sq ft. of space at 705 Progress for its charitable purposes and we are in full support of the approval.

SAAAC alongside the charities listed above are asking Committee and Council to adopt the following additional recommendations as part of Item #GL26.7 for the City/TDSB owned property at 705 Progress Avenue:

- 1.) Approve an additional 6,000 sq ft of space for the 5N2 Food for All charity, an additional 6,000 sq ft for the Council of Agencies Serving South Asians, and an additional 10,000 sq ft of space for the South Asian Autism Awareness Centre, as part of the City's below-market rent program as soon as space becomes available at the property.
- 2.) Approve a grant allocation of \$450,000 to 5N2 Food for All to undertake renovations and create a proper food preparation area and allocate \$400,000 to the City's Park Department to build an accessible playground at 705 Progress, with funding coming unallocated funds from Reserve Account XR2007.
- 3.) Request staff allocate additional grants to charities moving into 705 Progress (as part of the below-market rent program) to help them renovate the facilities, as funds from Reserve Account XR2007 become available, and examine other ways to support charities utilizing 705 Progress, to the satisfaction of Deputy City Manger, Corporate Services.
- 4.) Request staff follow-up on the May 24, 2017, Toronto Council request (CD20.8) to report on the feasibility of establishing a community hub at 705 Progress to the General Government and Licensing Committee in the first quarter of 2022.

- 5.) Request the co-owner of 705 Progress, the Toronto District School Board, to also waive their portion of rental fees applied to the charities at 705 Progress that are part of the City's below-market-rent program.
- 6.) Request the Toronto and District School Board work together with the City of Toronto to create a master development plan for 705 Progress, along with any Official Plan and/or Zoning amendments which may be necessary, that would allow a mixed-use development to take place at the site, including a new school, a permanent community hub for local charities, at least two new condo towers that would include an affordable housing component, and a large park area, and report back to Scarborough Community Council in the second quarter of 2022.

We believe our charities provide essential services to the Scarborough community and to groups that have traditionally been underserved. With your help, we believe we can make Scarborough – and the City of Toronto – an even more wonderful place to live than it is today.

Please feel free to reach out if you have any questions regarding our request.

Sincerely,

Geetha Moorthy
Executive Director
South Asian Autism Awareness Centre