

Rapid response anywhere and everywhere

Jay Levinson and Avi Domb describe a volunteer organisation staffed by volunteers, which provides rapid first response free of charge, transcending politics to provide medical care in emergencies



Elie Beer had no medical training. He was not a doctor or a nurse. In the late 1980s he was a 16-year-old volunteer in Jerusalem who saw a need to hasten emergency response. He was dismissed as an overly ambitious teenager, but he persisted. His efforts burgeoned into Hatzalah (Rescue), which started first in Jerusalem then was imitated in other Israeli cities, as a rapid first response service. Then a major change came about in 2006 when the various local efforts scattered throughout the country joined together as United Hatzalah.

In every respect Hatzalah, still headed by Beer, is unique. It has no ambulances to evacuate patients to hospital as does Hatzalah in New York, which provides full medical services. Instead it has a fleet of 250 motorcycles staffed by 3,000 volunteers. The key – quick response anywhere and everywhere in Israel. No politics, just medicine.

In Arab Jerusalem there are some 100 volunteers – Jews and Arabs working side-by-side. Elsewhere in the country there are Druze and Bedouin volunteers as well.

As Dov Meisel, Senior Vice-President, explains: “The idea is to bridge the gap until the ambulance arrives.”

Average response time to emergency calls is under three minutes (ten to 15 minutes

United Hatzalah stresses neighbourhood deployment rather than formal stations, so as to provide rapid response

United Hatzalah



for an ambulance), an excellent achievement that is made possible by innovative thinking and modern technology.

The stress is on neighbourhood deployment, rather than formal stations somewhere in the city. In the Ramat Gan Diamond Centre (a cluster of tall buildings near Tel Aviv), roads are so congested that it is problematic for a motorcycle to weave through traffic and, upon arrival, there is often nowhere to park the bike. The solution was to select people working in the buildings, train them as qualified paramedics and provide them with medical equipment for quick response.

The equipment is compact and refreshed or replaced as necessary. It essentially includes virtually everything found in an ambulance, except a stretcher.

Another small detail is that responders working in the Diamond Centre have two kits – one for the office and one for the car, so that the second will be available in the neighbourhood back home.

Investing in response

Which potential responder is closest to the emergency? Real-time mapping is maintained in a 24-hour command centre, so the closest unit can always be deployed, which was 260,000 times in 2015. Needless to say, the command centre has numerous telephone lines and a variety of language speakers with backup just seconds away.

Hatzalah volunteers are an investment. Costs in the first year are about \$7,500, then in following years, \$2,600. This includes training, equipment and insurance. Funds come from donations, primarily from abroad. All services provided by Hatzalah are free.

Is it worth it? Their proven record of saving lives gives a convincing answer.

Meisel sums up the work of Hatzalah: “If people start to imitate you, that proves you are doing something right.”

In that spirit several requests have come from cities and countries abroad to help them set up Hatzalah-like units.

Success is contagious.

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