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Kosher care

Hatzolah, a Jewish paramedic organization, provides emergency first-response service in Montreal

By Mark Cardwell

[Back to Cover](#)

It's been second-time lucky for an emergency first-response organization of volunteers that serves the Orthodox Jewish community in Montreal—and it's proving to be a windfall for residents in at least three neighbourhoods.

Since returning to Montreal five years ago, Hatzolah, an international Jewish health-care movement that provides first-aid emergency response by medically trained volunteers, has planted firm roots in the Quebec metropolis. "Our mandate is far from complete. We still have a long way to go," said Laib Reuvan Feldman, a Montreal Hatzolah board member and one of the group's 40 "responders."

Founded in New York City in the 1950s as a first-aid service for elderly members of the city's tightly knit Orthodox community, the Hatzolah concept and organizational model has been successfully duplicated in more than a dozen cities around the world with large Jewish populations.

Fittingly, Hatzolah is a Hebrew word meaning "to save."

In the early 1980s, an attempt was made to bring the organization to Montreal, which then boasted the largest Jewish population in North America outside of New York. (Today, it is third, after Miami.)

Feldman, an Orthodox Jew and American expatriate who was involved in the project in the 1980s, says it failed for two reasons. First, Montreal's Jewish community was in the throes of a post-referendum demographic upheaval; second, there was general satisfaction with Quebec's public health-care system. As a result, the financial and moral support needed to sustain the volunteer system were missing.

When a second attempt was made in 1996, however, the landscape had changed dramatically.

Montreal's Jewish community, for example, had stabilized at about 175,000 members (including 15,000 Orthodox, or observant Jews), most of whom lived in a half-dozen, closely connected neighbourhoods in the west-centre of the city.

At the same time, public confidence in Quebec's health-care system was falling.

Montreal's ambulance service, Urgences-Santé, was also increasingly besieged by administrative, labour and equipment problems, many of which remain unresolved. While legally obliged to respond to emergency calls in just over eight minutes, the ambulance service was blamed in a number of highly publicized, botched emergency cases in which response times were 15 minutes and more.

Not surprisingly, Montreal's Jewish community readily embraced an emergency first-aid service comprising friends and neighbours that is able to respond to calls in two or three minutes.

Like Hatzolahs everywhere—including, since last year, Toronto —the Montreal organization is headed by a board of rabbis, a board of directors and a medical board. There are also division heads and co-ordinators for each of the three sectors where the service is offered: 'M' (Montreal), a 10-city-block square in Outremont; 'D' (De Vimy Street), an area of Mount Royal in which a large Jewish school, an old-age home and seven synagogues are located; and 'W' (Westbury Street), which is part of the suburbs of Hampstead and Snowdon.

The two latter sectors have the highest concentration of elderly persons in all of Montreal.

On the ground, there are seven dispatchers who work from their homes using a sophisticated communication system that includes two emergency phone lines (which are advertised only within the Jewish community), two-way radios and computers.

When calls are received (an average of three a day), dispatchers first decide whether they can be handled by one of Hatzolah's responders, or if 911 should also be called. Often, dispatchers call both, since the organization's protocol dictates both dispatchers and responders call 911 for, as Feldman puts it, "anything above a splinter."

Like Feldman, who received his medical training in New York at private expense, all responders are trained in basic life support, the equivalent of, say, a standard level-1 paramedic in Ontario. Roughly a dozen are trained in advanced life support and one is a full paramedic.

All responders are able to deal with emergency first-response crises such as heart attacks, trauma, allergic reactions, motor vehicle accidents, choking and imminent childbirth. They are also trained to administer basic medications, such as epinephrine for allergic reactions and nitro-glycerine.

In addition to wearing identifying caps, jackets and badges, volunteers carry a panoply of medical equipment in their cars, including braces, splints, oxygen and basic medicines.

More than a dozen responders are certified in the use of automatic defibrillators. They share six machines stored in centrally located synagogues.

Responders are not, however, permitted to start intravenous drips, administer drugs or transport patients to hospital.

The group has transport capability under certain conditions during the summer months in the Laurentian area north of Montreal, where a large number of Montreal Jews pass the summer. Under the terms of an agreement with both the regional health board and the local ambulance company, Hatzolah operates an ER vehicle with lights and a siren in that region from mid-June until mid-September.

While all Hatzolah volunteers must be Torah-observant, responders must also be educated on religious issues, such as the tricky art of dealing with emergencies on the Sabbath.

Though observant Jews can't start fires on the Sabbath—and both a car's ignition and lights are considered fires—Hatzolah responders can drive to an emergency call. Once the emergency has passed, however, they must be driven home—and even have the car doors opened for them—by a non-Jewish volunteer.

Responders also provide emergency first-aid assistance to all people in need of

[Back to Contents](#)

medical attention at the scene of a call.

Notably, Montreal responders have delivered at least two babies, responded to two pediatric cardiac arrests and helped stabilize dozens of victims of car accidents and serious accidents in the home.

"We're not trying—nor do we want—to replace or compete with either 911 or Urgences-Santé," said Feldman. "On the contrary, we see ourselves as a complementary emergency service."

Although relations between Hatzolah and Urgences-Santé technicians were initially frosty, Feldman says the latter have come to appreciate—and even welcome—the efforts of Hatzolah volunteers.

Serge Boudreau, deputy director of Urgences-Santé's west sector—one of five administrative zones in the city, and the area in which Hatzolah operates—considers the organization a bonus to the community at large.

"The Hatzolah people are very competent and easy to work with," he said. "It's definitely a plus to have them as partners, not only in health care, but as a bridge to an ethnic group with a specific language and customs."

Responders frequently accompany patients to hospital (particularly older, Yiddish-speaking patients), and stay with them through the processing procedure. When necessary, they will even supply patients with kosher food.

"I think the Hatzolah volunteers have earned immense respect through their professionalism and expertise in managing patients in a pre-hospital setting," added Dr. Alex Guttman, the director of Hatzolah's medical board and a senior ER staff member at the Jewish General Hospital, the Montreal facility where most Jewish patients are treated.

In addition to emergency first-response, the organization has connected with Montreal's disaster services programs.

During the infamous ice storm, for example, Hatzolah members took a public health advisory to boil drinking water door to door because it was issued on a Friday night—the beginning of the Sabbath—and there were fears members of the insular Orthodox community wouldn't hear the news.

For now, Feldman is happy about the inroads Hatzolah has made within Montreal's Jewish community over the past five years. His dream now, he says, is to see the organization become a recognized and integrated health-care partner in the city.

"I doubt we'll ever see a day when we're as big as Hatzolah New York, which has something like 80 transport vehicles, 1,000 trained technicians, and an operating budget of around \$4 million to \$5 million," said Feldman. "But I do think we can continue to expand our services in a way that will enable us to provide more benefits to a greater number of people."

—Mark Cardwell is the Medical Post's Quebec City correspondent.

