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Hatzalah, In A First, Takes Public Money

With fundraising flagging, volunteer ambulance corps gets \$445,000 grant from Assembly.

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The Chevra Hatzalah volunteer ambulance company accepted a \$445,000 capital grant from the New York State Assembly on Monday, taking public money for the first time in the group's 35-year history.

The money will be used to upgrade and overhaul the organization's central communications system at a facility on the border of Flatbush and Borough Park in Brooklyn that reaches 1,200 volunteers in the New York area.

Hatzalah, Hebrew for rescue, has 14 chapters in neighborhoods in all five boroughs as well as one serving the Five Towns in Long Island and another in the Catskills. Hatzolah organizations in other areas, such as Rockland County and Lakewood, N.J., are not affiliated with Chevra Hatzalah.

"By overhauling its communication system we are giving this important organization the tools it needs to continue providing our community with its services," said Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver at a news conference for Jewish newspapers in his downtown offices Monday, joined by Hatzalah leaders. "These dedicated volunteers who give so generously of their time deserve nothing less."

Hatzalah's president, Heshy Jacobs, said the organization was seeing an increase in call volume during hard budget times because of the popular belief that budget cuts have reduced the response time of city-run ambulances. Jacobs said that in Borough Park and other areas Hatzalah had reduced response time by keeping rotating shifts of volunteers in cars waiting to respond rather than rely on volunteers who may have to awaken at night and rush from their homes to answer a call.

Jacobs said Hatzalah's survival rate for heart attack victims was 15 percent, far higher than the citywide average of less than 1 percent.



[1] Capital grant will be used to upgrade Hatzalah's communications system at its Brooklyn headquarters.

Hatzalah's chapters in Jewish neighborhoods raise their own funds but contribute a portion to the central organization to cover administrative and logistical expenses. Jacobs said that board members of Hatzalah had been divided over whether to accept state money for the first time.

But Rabbi David Cohen, Hatzalah's CEO, said the economy left the group little choice.

"We are in a period when private finances and philanthropies are really hurting," said Cohen, who joined the organization 18 months ago. "We are having difficulty maintaining our operational budget and, to invest additional funds of almost half a million in our communications system makes [the upgrade] possible without causing loss of operations."

Rabbi Cohen said the organization's fundraising "has managed to keep up, just barely, and in some neighborhoods we have not kept up; we have had to subsidize some of those neighborhoods."

Rabbi Cohen said that the equipment upgrades would include new radio systems as well as a voice-over Internet protocol system to serve as a backup in case conventional systems fail, and an auxiliary facility at a location to be determined in case the first location is out of commission in an emergency situation. "The more redundancy the better," he said.

The funding was presented by Assemblywoman Helene Weinstein of Brooklyn, a Democrat who represents parts of Sheepshead Bay and Flatbush.

"Over the years I have called Hatzalah various times and said, 'Can we buy you an ambulance, can we buy you funding.' And I know this is the first time [they said yes]," said Weinstein.

For video of the Hatzalah press conference at Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver's office, visit The Jewish Week website, www.thejewishweek.com [2].

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