

JANUARY 25, 2016

LAST UPDATED: MONDAY, JANUARY 25, 2016, 6:40 AM

# Orthodox volunteers who aided search for Passaic woman also bail people out of ordinary jams

**BY MARY DIDUCH**

STAFF WRITER | THE RECORD

As scores searched frantically for a missing Passaic woman this month, hundreds of Orthodox Jewish men were among the volunteers.

Many belong to Chaverim groups, organizations that more typically are summoned to bail people out of ordinary jams. They might, for instance, fix a flat tire for a stranded motorist, help look for a lost engagement ring or assist someone locked out of her house.

"Anything you would call a friend for, that's what we're there for," said Ari Erental, who handles social media for Chaverim of Passaic, which was founded in 2009.

Chaverim is Hebrew for "friends." The members, all men, volunteer in their spare time and expect nothing in return, aside from the knowledge they are serving a niche need in their communities.

"We really wanted to do something good with the extra time that we have," said David Roberts, a co-founder of Chaverim of Teaneck, which was started in 2008.

The concept behind the Chaverim organizations originated in the late 1990s in an Orthodox Jewish community in Rockland County, N.Y. At first, the mission was to provide simple, free roadside assistance. But as the group's portfolio expanded to include a wider range of emergencies, the idea spread to Orthodox Jewish communities in North Jersey and elsewhere that established their own Chaverim organizations.

The branches operate independently but are loosely affiliated and can provide massive manpower when needed — as with the search for 22-year-old Devorah Stubin, whose body was found in a car pulled from the Passaic River in Wallington on the night of Jan. 16. The Teaneck group, which has about 20 members, works mostly in Teaneck and Bergenfield and handles 700 to 900 calls a year, Roberts said. The Passaic group, which has about 25 volunteers, operates largely in the Clifton and the Passaic Park neighborhood of Passaic. It handles about 2,500 calls a year, said Shaya Eisenman, the group's coordinator of member services and communications.

Neither Chaverim of Passaic nor Chaverim of Teaneck pays its members, who will drop what they are doing to help someone at almost any hour of the day. Both rely on donations, but neither holds formal fundraising events.

"There's no reason why helping someone out should need a lot of money," Roberts said.



DANIELLE PARHIZKARAN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Members of Rockland County Chaverim 74 map out their search for a missing Passaic woman at the Maywood Command Center on Jan. 15, 2016.

The two branches use some of the donated money to outfit new members with some starter tools and equipment. In Passaic, new volunteers receive a pack with tools like road flares and a jack that costs around \$400, Eisenman said. The group also conducts training for new recruits, usually run in-house by more seasoned members. Sometimes, an outside expert will be brought in to conduct the training.

Though the idea for Chaverim organizations originated in the Orthodox Jewish community, which accounts for the majority of the calls received, the volunteers will assist anyone.

The groups each have a phone number – circulated through social media, Jewish publications and local resource pages – that someone needing a hand can call. A dispatcher will then send a group text message to the volunteers, and whoever is available will head to the scene. Response times vary, as the volunteers work and have families, Eisenman said.

There are some restrictions on what the volunteers, who have to apply for membership, can do. Most significantly, they won't take calls during Shabbat, or the Jewish Sabbath, a period of rest from Friday evening to Saturday evening. The volunteers break Shabbat when a life is at stake, as with the search for Stubin, who suffered from epilepsy, chronic pain and fatigue and was last seen during a traffic stop in Maywood on Jan. 14.

"This one was a very, very extreme case," Eisenman said. "We were there and we gave everything that we got."

The groups also don't handle medical situations, but there are other Jewish volunteer groups that help in such cases. For example, Bikur Cholim provides health-related services, and Hatzolah is an around-the-clock emergency medical service found in many Orthodox communities.

Chaverim of Passaic also isn't allowed to tow broken-down cars, but that doesn't mean its members can't help.

Erenthal remembered a call he took around 11 p.m. on New Year's Eve. A towing service had told a driver, stranded in the middle of a road, that it wouldn't be able to get to him for about four hours. Erenthal arrived in a few minutes. The car's transmission had died so Erenthal helped to push the car to the side of the road, out of the flow of traffic.

"We're not commercial," Erenthal said. "We're just there to help."

On occasion, the volunteers will encounter a situation that calls for fast thinking. Last summer, a van carrying a group of people traveling from Montreal to Rockland County caught fire near Albany, N.Y. The Sabbath was approaching – which, for observers, meant no driving, cooking or using technology – and the van's occupants needed places to stay, Eisenman said.

A message went out to the heads of the regional Chaverim organizations, seeking someone with a contact in Albany. Eisenman was able to connect the stranded travelers with a local rabbi. The rabbi lodged the travelers and the Chaverim groups sent food from a restaurant in Monroe, N.Y., to the travelers before the start of Sabbath, Eisenman said.

Eisenman said Chaverim of Passaic hopes to expand by receiving more training so the volunteers can offer more services to the public. His group is working on receiving certification from the Federal Emergency Management Agency as a Community Emergency Response Team, so it is better positioned to help in the event of a natural disaster.

"If something happens to you," Eisenman said. "you want a friend to come help you out."

Email: [diduch@northjersey.com](mailto:diduch@northjersey.com)

---

SUBSCRIBE TO **The Record** CALL (888) 504-4280