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FAQ – Freeway Incident Response Safety Team (FIRST) Frequently Asked Questions

Why does the Twin Cities Metro Area need a FIRST Program?

About half of the traffic congestion on Twin Cities freeways is caused by incidents. This includes crashes, stalled vehicles or debris in the roadway. The congestion generated from these incidents is responsible for causing about 15% of all freeway crashes, known as “secondary crashes”. The **FIRST** Program helps to minimize congestion and prevents secondary crashes through the quick response and removal of incidents. The program is a key component of the Metro Area’s incident management program.

What happened to the Highway Helper Program?

The name of the Highway Helper Program was changed to the Freeway Incident Response Safety Team or **FIRST** Program to reflect the expanded role of the program. **FIRST** trucks quickly respond to and assist in the removal of highway incidents in order to help minimize congestion and prevent secondary accidents.

Don’t FIRST drivers just change tires?

No, in fact in 2007 the **FIRST** drivers changed only 2,668 tires out of the over 20,000 incidents they helped at. They also ...

- Detect freeway incidents by patrolling metro freeways
- Quickly respond to and remove incidents
 - Push disabled vehicles out of the traffic lanes using push bumpers
 - Remove debris from the traffic lanes
- Provide traffic control and scene security at crashes by activating their large arrow board on top of their truck
- Assist State Patrol with first aid at crash scenes
- Assist motorists with emergency vehicle repairs
- Open and close the I-394 high occupancy vehicle lane gate arms twice per day

Can’t people change their own tire?

Even a stalled vehicle on the shoulder can cause considerable gawker congestion, especially during the rush hour period. The quicker we can get a vehicle off the shoulder, the less congested and safer the freeway system will be. The **FIRST** drivers have the proper equipment to quickly assist a motorist in changing a flat tire and keep traffic moving.

How do incidents cause congestion?

A stalled vehicle or crash blocking one lane on a three-lane freeway reduces the freeway capacity by 50%. A crash on the shoulder can reduce capacity by 19%, while even a stalled vehicle on the shoulder can reduce the capacity of the roadway by 9% (Source: Traffic Incident Management Handbook, FHWA Nov. 2000) **FIRST** trucks quickly detect, respond to and help remove incidents to help get freeway capacities back to normal levels.

How many times did FIRST drivers clear incidents from the traffic lanes?

In 2007, the **FIRST** Program pushed 995 vehicles out of traffic lanes and removed debris 1142 times from traffic lanes.

How many total incidents a year does the FIRST program assist at?

In 2007, the **FIRST** logged 33,209 assists by pushing vehicles out of traffic lanes, removing debris, assisting the State Patrol with traffic control at crash scenes, providing small quantities of gasoline, jump starting vehicles and changing flat tires, among other things. Some incidents had multiple assists.

Why do FIRST trucks patrol the freeway?

Quickly detecting, responding to and removing of incidents is essential to maximizing the efficiency of our existing freeway system. Having dedicated roving freeway service patrols makes quick detection and response possible. Each minute of incident duration results in 4 to 5 minutes of additional delay. (Source: ITE Journal, March 1992) While patrolling freeways, **FIRST** drivers detected 85% of the incidents they attend.

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How much does it cost?

The **FIRST** Program costs around \$1,000,000 annually. This cost includes employees, supplies, equipment and vehicle expenses. This program produces a 15.8:1 benefit/cost for metro area motorists based on reduced delay time from the quick removal of stalled vehicles and other incidents.

Do other cities have similar program?

The use of freeway service patrols to combat congestion has grown substantially over the past decade. Over 70 freeway service patrol programs operate around the country with 45 programs initiated since 1992. The majority of these are funded and run by state DOTs and are highly cost effective. Of the 49 Metro areas in the US with populations over one million, only four do not have a freeway service patrol operating. The following table summarizes some of these programs:

City	Annual Cost (\$ million)	Miles Covered	# Vehicles	Benefit/Cost *
Los Angeles, CA	\$ 21.3	411	146 tow trucks	15:1
San Francisco Bay Area, CA	\$ 6.0	362	60 tow trucks	11:1
San Diego, CA	\$ 2.4	203	26 tow trucks	7:1
Chicago, IL	\$ 5.5	80	35 tow trucks	17:1
Houston, TX	\$ 1.4	190	18 vans	6.6:1 to 23:1
Denver, CO	\$ 1.3	60	12 tow trucks	20:1 to 23:1
Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN	\$ 1.0	220	10 pickup trucks	15.8:1

*The benefit/cost calculations are not directly comparable due to the differing assumptions and methods used between agencies. MnDOT's benefit/cost ratio was calculated more conservatively than other metro areas.

What does the Minnesota State Patrol think about the program?

Captain Al Smith states, "The State Patrol views the [**FIRST**] program as a beneficial safety program that has helped locate and remove traffic hazards from freeway lanes."

Why can't the State Patrol provide the services that the FIRST program does?

The State Patrol has about the same number of Troopers on the road today as they did in the 1980's. With the increase in congestion and crashes they are often too busy to assist stranded motorists. They also do not carry the needed equipment for quick repairs. The **FIRST** Program allows Troopers to perform other high priority law enforcement duties.

When did the FIRST Program start?

Mn/DOT initiated the Highway Helper program in December 1987 with three routes covering 40 miles. The program has expanded gradually over the years. One route was added using Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) funds in 1996, one route was added in FY 1998 and one route added in FY 2000. The name was changed in 2003 to the Freeway Incident Response Safety Team (**FIRST**) to reflect on the role they play in removing incidents on the freeway. Two more routes were added in 2005-2006. A total of 225 miles are currently covered.

Where and when do FIRST trucks patrol?

The **FIRST** Program patrols 225 miles of metro freeways. [See the FIRST Coverage Map](#). Six to ten brightly colored OSHA green pickup trucks patrol the freeways from 3:30 AM to 9:00 PM Mondays through Fridays, with limited coverage on the weekends.

How can I request a FIRST truck?

The **FIRST** program works closely with the Minnesota State Patrol. If you are involved in a crash on the freeway or your vehicle is stalled, stay in your vehicle and call 911 to reach the State Patrol. They will then contact the Traffic Operations Dispatcher who will dispatch a **FIRST** truck. The **FIRST** program is limited to providing service only on the metro area freeways.

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Does the public support the FIRST Program?

Market research conducted by Carmichael Lynch Spong in 1996 indicates that 76 percent of the public are aware of the program and 87 percent of those people think that the program is a good use of state tax dollars.

Over 5,000 response cards or letters have been received from the motorists assisted by **FIRST** drivers and 97 percent of these motorists rated the **FIRST** Program as "excellent."