



On Patrol

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News From the San Francisco Bay Area Freeway Service Patrol

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1 Million Assists... And Counting

by Sze Lei Leong, MTC SAFE



Daisaku Edwards Jr., Daisaku Edwards & Rick Mendell - Redhill Towing

A stranded motorist and the veteran Freeway Service Patrol (FSP) tow truck driver who came to his rescue together helped the Bay Area FSP program reach its 1 millionth assist on Monday, March 24, 2003.

Daisaku Edwards of Vallejo was on his way to drop off his 3-year-old son, Daisaku Junior, at daycare, when his car stalled at the dangerous Interstate 80/580/880 split in Oakland. FSP driver Rick Mendell, who was patrolling Beat 2, got the message over his mobile data computer, alerting him to a disabled red car on the left shoulder of Interstate 80, westbound. He reached the stranded Hyundai at 9:45 a.m., and quickly positioned his truck in front of it. After assessing the situation, Mendell decided that the safest thing to do was to tow the vehicle.

With cars whizzing by at speeds in excess of 60 miles an hour, he attached the vehicle and towed it to a California Highway Patrol-identified drop site in Emeryville, out of harm's way.

Edwards praised the FSP for its "right-on-time" service, and said, "It's great that you guys are out here providing this service to the public. I won't complain the next time I get a bill from the DMV to pay my vehicle registration fees."

Historic Milestone

While the assist was all in a day's work for Mendell, who has been driving for

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the FSP since the program's inception in 1992 and serves as Redhill Towing's general manager, it represents a significant milestone in the history of the Bay Area FSP program. Celebrating the event recognizes the day-to-day efforts of tow operators like Mendell and all those who have been part of the FSP over the past 10-plus years.

FSP drivers are having an important, positive impact on the region's mobility as they patrol our freeways, assist stranded motorists, clear debris, and generally make our commutes safer and smoother. Considering the by-products of congestion — lost productivity, pollution from idling cars, fuel costs, etc. — the benefit-to-cost ratio of providing the FSP service is greater than 10 to one.

Worthwhile Investment

One cost incurred by the FSP that provides a major benefit is the cost of the program's data and voice communication system, a system that is critical to the efficient operation of the FSP. It allows CHP dispatchers to communicate with beat officers, the public and tow operators, passing on information regarding incidents that occur anywhere in the region and dispatching a tow operator for service requested by a motorist via cell phone or call box.

The system also permits tow operators to share information about

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511 – New Number, New Service

by John Goodwin,
MTC Public Information

Bay Area residents got an early Christmas present when MTC officially activated its 511 phone- and Web-based traveler information system at a Dec. 6, 2002 ceremony in Walnut Creek. The new 511 number joins 411 and 911 on the list of easy-to-remember, three-digit phone numbers delivering important public services. Callers who dial 511 can use the toll-free service to get on-demand information about road conditions and traffic incidents on specific routes throughout the region; route, fare and schedule information from dozens of rail, ferry and bus transit service providers plus operators of paratransit service for elderly or disabled riders; and information about carpooling, vanpooling, and bicycling.



Caltrans

Caltrans' Transportation Management Center (shown above) is one of numerous sources of real-time traffic information for 511.

The Bay Area is the largest metropolitan area in the country, and the first in California, to activate the 511 service, which is being rolled out in stages nationwide. The launch is the result of a partnership between MTC, Caltrans, the California Highway Patrol, 35 different transit operators, 20 providers of paratransit services, and RIDES for Bay Area Commuters Inc., which supplies carpooling, vanpooling,

bicycling, and other commute option information, including information about transportation to airports.

Internet Access

In tandem with the 511 phone service, MTC is launching a new Web portal at <www.511.org> for travelers who prefer to get their information online. The combination of phone and Web services is the successor to the Bay Area's six-year-old TravInfo® system. Major advances in the 511 phone service include a state-of-the-art voice response system that eliminates the need to navigate your way through a push-button choice menu.

New features now available at 511.org include an innovative online ridematching service that provides commuters a quick, easy, and free way to find others interested in sharing their ride to work in a carpool or vanpool. The online ridematching tool also can be accessed at <www.rides.org>.

Improving the System

The 511 system will become even more convenient in the months ahead. Among the new tools available later in 2003, via both phone and Web, will be a service providing actual travel times from point to point along key freeway routes.

Because 511 is a voice-enabled system, there are nearly as many different ways to ask for information as there are people in the Bay Area. MTC and its engineering partners have been testing and monitoring the system to see how callers actually use it, and then making adjustments to improve the application. Among the adjustments was programming the phone system to understand different ways people might ask for the same thing, like "880," "Interstate 880," or "Nimitz Freeway."

511 is a free call from any conventional phone in the nine Bay Area counties. Charges from cell phones depend on the caller's plan. Major wireless carriers offering the 511 service in the Bay Area include AT&T, Cingular, Sprint, and T-Mobile.



MTC's Maldonado Moves On

by Réka Goode, MTC Public Information



It's been a year of changes and milestones for Jaime Maldonado, MTC SAFE's manager for the Bay Area Freeway Service Patrol (FSP) program: In August 2002, the FSP celebrated its 10th anniversary; in December, Maldonado's first child, a son named Kuba, was born; in March 2003, Maldonado marked the fifth anniversary of his MTC

employment and involvement with the FSP; and in April, he began making the transition to a brand new position at MTC: intelligent transportation systems (ITS) program coordinator.

In his new job, he will focus on telecommunications, an interest he developed as the MTC SAFE point person for the FSP telecommunications system upgrade. He will help define how data communication of all kinds is conducted between public agencies, especially between traffic management centers (TMCs). Just as he did at the FSP, he will be working in partnership with other organizations, including Caltrans, as well as transit operators, "smart corridor" administrators and TMCs around the region

Maldonado said that, while he will miss working with the FSP partners and meeting with the tow contractors, he knows that, "I will be leaving the program in good hands."

Quarterly Awards for July through December 2002

by Réka Goode,
MTC Public Information

BEAT OF THE QUARTER

For the second quarter in a row, Beat 12 has been selected as Beat of the Quarter. This constantly busy stretch of Interstate 80 between San Pablo Dam Road in San Pablo and Cummings Skyway in Rodeo has been patrolled by Freeway Service Patrol (FSP) drivers employed by Ken Betts' Towing for close to five years.

Based in Oakland, Ken Betts' Towing has been in business for over 40 years. It has two trucks plying Beat 12, a relatively short beat as compared to many others in the program but one that gets more than its share of incidents involving people. During the fourth quarter of 2002, for example (the period for which the company got its second Beat of the Quarter award), Ken Betts' drivers averaged close to 70 percent people-related assists as compared to less than 55 percent for the Bay Area FSP as a whole.

Being able to help so many people is something the drivers really enjoy, the company's sales manager, Roger Craig noted, and something the FSP training has prepared them for. Craig said the drivers "take a personal pride in the FSP program," an attitude that



Jessie Galicia and Ambika Maharaj of Ken Betts' Towing patrol busy Beat 12 in the East Bay.

is reflected in the fact that the beat consistently racks up one of the highest "excellent" service ratings of any of the 33 beats. Craig commented that "We have a good reputation and the FSP is a good strong program," a winning combination, as the motorists' response attests.



DRIVER OF THE QUARTER

If you continue south on Interstate 80 from Beat 12, you reach Beat 2, another very busy stretch of that East Bay freeway. The FSP Driver of the Quarter for the fourth quarter of 2002, Ellis Thomas, patrols Beat 2 and deems it the busiest of the many beats he has driven in the approximately eight years he's been with the program, the last six with Redhill Towing of San Rafael.

A veteran driver of more than 15 years overall, he notes that FSP drivers have to have special skills to survive out on the road day in and day out. He credits the California Highway Patrol training with helping him stay safe.

Thomas says the most important thing for any driver is to pay attention at all times. He has seen firsthand some tragic results of inattention by motorists. In one incident, he saw a car flip end over end "like a piece of paper," he says, resulting in a crushed vehicle that had to be cut apart to rescue the passengers and driver inside. In another situation, a motorcyclist

westbound on I-80 was thrown from his vehicle with such force that he landed in the eastbound lanes. While it can be disturbing to witness these kinds of incidents, Thomas says, "You learn to live with it. You just do what you have to do."

"Getting out there to help people is the main thing," he notes, and it is what makes the job the most satisfying for him.



Ellis Thomas,
Redhill Towing

Upcoming Events

Technical Advisory Committee Meetings

8:30 a.m., Tuesdays
MTC MetroCenter
May 13
July 8
1999 Harrison St., 17th Floor
June 10

Tow Contractors' Meetings

11 a.m., Tuesdays
MTC MetroCenter
May 13
July 8

FSP Awards Event Planning Meetings

12 noon, Tuesdays
MTC MetroCenter
May 13
July 8

Quarterly Driver Refresher Training

11 a.m.–1 p.m.
CHP, Oakland
May 29, 30
Aug 27, 28
CHP, Dublin
June 5, 6

Proficiency Testing

7 a.m.–4 p.m.
CHP, Vallejo
July 14


Certification Classes


7 a.m.–4 p.m.
CHP, Vallejo
July 23–25

The Public Speaks


Motorists continue to mail, e-mail and phone in praise and descriptions of their experiences with the FSP program. Here are a few recent comments.

Voicemail


 (12/06/02) “My daughter used your service last night. I think it probably saved her life. She was in a real bad situation when one of your Freeway Service Patrol drivers found her. I cannot say enough about your service. Thank you.”

 (01/15/03) “I’m calling to thank you for this program. My husband was stuck on the freeway this morning, and within a couple of minutes somebody arrived to help him. What could have been a disaster was made into a pleasant experience. I think you probably don’t get praised enough, so I wanted to call to say thank you so much.”

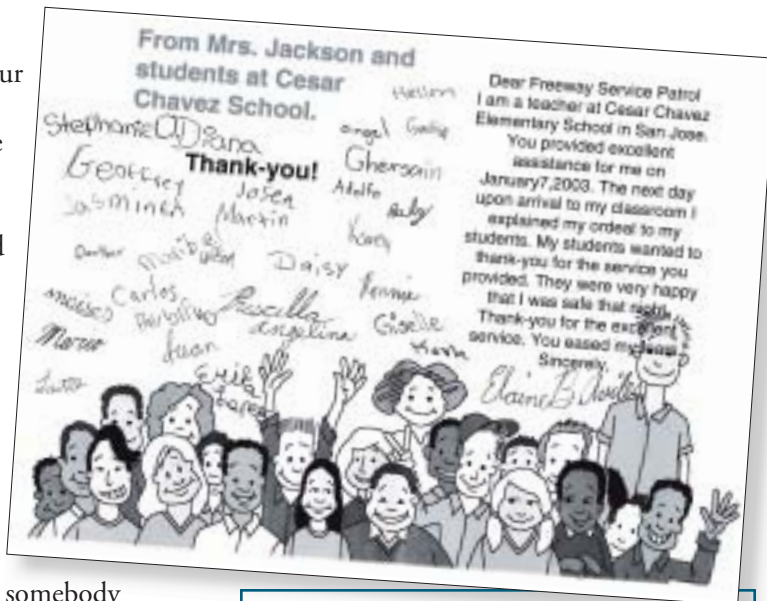
Letters

 (01/15/03) “This letter is in commendation for the service that I received from your driver, Fragiadakis Kanakis, on Oct. 10, 2002. Not only was he very courteous, but he also did an outstanding job recovering my car from a dangerous location on the freeway. I had a major tire blow-out and only had enough time to pull over to the left shoulder. Your driver was put in a very high-risk situation in attempting to rescue my car. The driver performed the job and was able to get my car to safety. I hope that he will be recognized for his extraordinary effort.”

E-mail

 (12/11/02) “The FSP driver [Ruben Banaban] pulled over at exactly the same time that I had pulled over and got me off the highway in less than five minutes. He did a great job of explaining the service to me and helping

me stay calm during this stressful time. He was very respectful and made sure that I was safe and didn’t leave until he knew for sure that another tow service was on the way to meet me. I hope that you let him know what a great job he is doing and how great he is with people. There aren’t many people around willing to take the extra step as he did.”



Millionth Assist

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current highway conditions and request assistance from a fellow beat partner or CHP beat officer.

The communications network is augmented by an automated vehicle locator (AVL) system, which dispatchers use to pinpoint the location of FSP tow trucks and match a reported incident to the nearest tow operator in the field. This feature speeds up response time, something Vallejo motorist Edwards — and other motorists in need of help — definitely appreciate.

Counting the Next Million

Beyond giving FSP dispatchers, tow operators and CHP beat officers a way to communicate, the statewide voice and data network and AVL system also allow us to track incidents and assists by type and duration. This information is used to help determine whether current FSP coverage is adequate, and whether new or expanded service should be added.

As we head into our second decade of service, our information system will continue to count every assist, up to and beyond the next million.

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