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FSP driver Enrique Nava has been patrolling the Glendale (2) Freeway and the Ventura (134) Freeway for six years. He says the program really helps to keep traffic clear and congestion down.

'Freeway Angels' Help to Tame Snarling Traffic

- Riding with Enrique Nava, a six-year FSP veteran through the San Gabriel Valley

By JIMMY STROUP

(May 28, 2008) Metro Freeway Service Patrol (FSP) driver Enrique Nava gets visibly excited when he receives a rescue call from a stranded motorist on the freeway.



"Ooh! I think we can get to this one. I hope one of my partners doesn't beat us there," Nava says as he exits the Glendale (2) Freeway to head in the opposite direction. "I'm pretty sure we'll make it."

It's not really a contest for Nava. He and other FSP drivers just want to respond quickly to motorist calls for help. For

hundreds of stranded motorists who dial #399, they call Nava and his fellow FSP drivers "angels" of the freeways.

Nava's "beat" is the Glendale Freeway between Golden State (I-5) Freeway and Foothill (210) Freeway. He's also responsible for patrolling Ventura (134) Freeway between Hollywood (101) Freeway and the Foothill Freeway.

Nava generally sees routine troubles: flat tires, empty gas tanks, fender benders. He learns of those problems through various methods, mostly by finding disabled vehicles through routine patrol. He also receives assignments from CHP dispatchers who receive calls from motorists via freeway Call Boxes, #399 (mobile Call Box) cell phone calls and 911.

"You get called an 'angel' a lot out here," Nava says. "It keeps you wanting to do this job. People really appreciate and are thankful for what you do. And when they find out it's free? If they didn't know, they're even happier than they were just to get help."

Nava and five other drivers are employed by the contracted tow service provider responsible for weekday patrol on these two freeways. The FSP patrol routes are contracted out to private companies by Metro. CalTrans and the California Highway Patrol (CHP) partner with the agency to support the program. This particular route is contracted to Hollywood Car Carrier, who Nava works for directly.



Nava used wire to tie up the muffler of this SUV so its owner could at least drive it off the freeway and get the damage repaired. The accident victims discuss the crash with a CHP officer. FSP drivers work closely with CHP authorities. Calls for assistance are routed through the CHP switchboard and answered by FSP drivers.

Still, Nava said that he feels like he works for Metro, considering the stringent training regulations contracted businesses like Hollywood Car Carrier are required to maintain.

Dangerous surroundings

FSP drivers need to be fully qualified to change flat tires, jump-start cars, refill radiators and tape leaky hoses, and open locked cars – not to mention hooking up and towing incapacitated vehicles off the freeway.

"We have to attend refresher courses [twice a year to maintain our driver's license certifications and] to stay current on methods," Nava says. "For example, here in California we don't get a lot of all-wheel drive vehicles, which require a certain kind of tow hook-up compared to front-wheel or real-wheel drive. But just because we don't do it very often doesn't mean we don't need to know how."

Nava says this training also ensures that the FSP drivers stay safe while performing their duties.

"There's always spots where you feel unsafe...you're on a freeway, after all," Nava says. "If [I] think a spot is dangerous, I'll ask the driver to move. Some customers will complain that it'll scratch up their rims or something, but most understand and are happy to move."

In his experience, there are more people in distress in the evening rush than in the morning. He says summertime is the busiest season for flat tires because the heat is hard on tires that aren't in top condition.

Mostly, Nava says he stops to help people with flat tires or people who run out of gas. When he does end up towing a vehicle, FSP policy requires that the vehicle is towed off the freeway to the nearest drop location designated by CHP. Drop locations are adjacent to freeways, are well lit and near businesses that can lend some sort of assistance to the motorist, such as gas stations or restaurants.

“I take them someplace safe, someplace with lots of people and someplace they can get access to a phone,” Nava says. “I leave them somewhere so they can be responsible for their car and get on with their day.”

To be continued> Part II: Escalating gas prices make Nava's job more difficult.