



## OHIO DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

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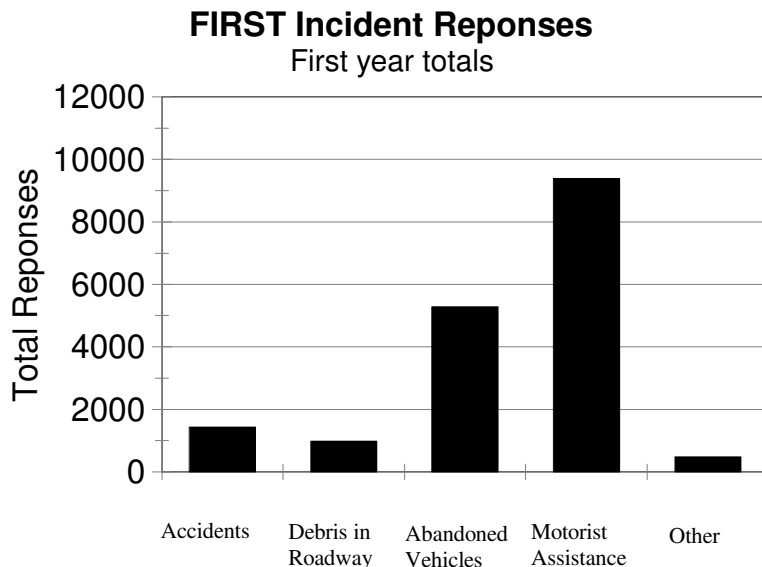
**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**August 16, 2002**

### ODOT'S FREEWAY PATROL POPULAR WITH MOTORISTS

(COLUMBUS) - Do you feel safer driving Columbus' highways? You should, thanks to the success of the Ohio Department of Transportation's Freeway Incident Response Service Team (FIRST). During its first year of operation, FIRST assisted more than 9,000 motorists, helping central Ohio drivers reach their destinations quickly and safely.

FIRST was created in 2001 to help detect and clear highway incidents faster. FIRST's primary focus is detecting and responding to minor incidents, such as property damage accidents, flat tires, stalled cars and debris in the roadway. More than 50 percent of congestion in urban areas is caused by such incidents, according to statistics from the U.S. Department of Transportation.



FIRST teams patrol Interstates 270, 670, 71 and 70 within the outerbelt, as well as State Route 315. ODOT runs two shifts each weekday, providing service from 5:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. Crews also work weekends during special events.

While ODOT officials say FIRST is helping to reduce congestion, the program is also popular with motorists. More than 1,200 motorists who have been helped by FIRST have completed comment cards or sent in letters of appreciation. "Because of the availability of the FIRST crew, motorists have a comfort level on the freeway. They know that if they break down, ODOT will be there to help them," said Jack Marchbanks, ODOT District Six deputy director.

Motorists are not the only ones with praise for the FIRST team. Lt. Rod Wittich of the Columbus Police Freeway Patrol is a big supporter. "We are thrilled with the work FIRST has done over the last year. It is obvious that FIRST crews are doing everything possible to assist motorists and make the freeways a safer place," Wittich said. "Thanks to FIRST crews' help, police officers are free to conduct accident investigations and traffic enforcement. This speeds up the process and keeps the highways moving."

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Over the past year, ODOT has logged the number and type of incident response including accidents, debris on the roadway, abandoned cars, motorist assistance and other incidents. During the first year of operation, FIRST crews responded to 17,623 incidents, with an average of 1,500 incidents per month.

By comparison, the Virginia Department of Transportation responds to an average of 2,500 incidents a month with 24 trucks and 36 drivers. ODOT FIRST crews have only four trucks and eight drivers covering 110 miles.

The program is also cost effective. An internal study showed a 5-to-1 benefit-to-cost ratio. ODOT spent approximately \$600,000 on FIRST during its first year, which means the public potentially saved \$3 million in gas, lost time and wages caused by congestion.

Marchbanks said the Central Ohio program will continue indefinitely. In addition, ODOT is likely to add new freeway service patrols in other urban areas across the state.

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