

CHAMPLAIN TOWERS SOUTH COLLAPSE JUNE 24, 2021

REPORT OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS CONSULTANTS¹

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¹ This report is designed to offer the views, observations, and recommendations of the outside crisis communications group. It is not designed to be a formal after-action report. We recommend that the Town of Surfside engage in a formal S.W.O.T. analysis to evaluate strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in the wake of this tragedy.

Dedication

We dedicate our work for the Town of Surfside to those who lost their lives in the collapse of the Champlain Towers South Condominium.

We also honor the life of our friend and colleague, Jilda Unruh, who dedicated her final days and used her considerable talents in service to the residents of the Town of Surfside.

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Town of Surfside, Florida (“Surfside” or the “Town”) retained The News Directors, Inc. (“TND”) to provide outside management and communications support following the collapse of the Champlain Towers South condominium. TND retained Carlos F. Gonzalez, P.A. and Blueprints4Safety, LLC to assist it in providing on-site crisis management and communications support.

This is not an after-action report as that term is typically understood in law enforcement and municipal government circles. Rather, this is a summary, prepared by Surfside’s outside crisis management and communications firm, designed to provide an overview of certain key events following the partial collapse of the Champlain Towers South condominium. In preparing this report, we spoke with department heads and other senior Town officials. Our goal was to better understand how Surfside’s employees responded to initial reports of the building collapse, how they worked together to provide key services to the community, and what lessons they learned along the way.

In this report, TND focuses primarily on what the Town of Surfside got right in responding to this critical incident. We consider these to be operational successes. We understand that Miami-Dade County and other outside entities will be preparing formal after-action reports as part of their overall analysis of the response to the collapse. These reports will be prepared with a critical eye and will offer specific recommendations for improving the response to future incidents. Our analysis, instead, highlights the efforts of the Town of Surfside, a small municipality which faced a catastrophe that far outpaced its resources and experiences. Despite all of that, Surfside logged many successes which we now chronicle here. Where we saw room for improvement, from our perspective as the Town’s outside crisis management and communications firm, we offered suggestions.

II. INTRODUCTION

Just after 1:00 a.m. on June 24, 2021, a portion of the Champlain Towers South condominium collapsed. Within a matter of seconds, millions of pounds of concrete and other debris fell, resulting in fatalities, casualties, and tens of millions of dollars in financial losses.

Although the incident involved a single structure, the collapse had a broad impact. Many international residents and part-time owners living outside Miami-Dade County called the Champlain Towers South condominium home. Surfside is a small town and most of its residents knew someone who lived in the South Tower. The loss of life has touched everyone in Surfside, from residents and small business owners, to elected officials and Town employees. It has also touched families in Argentina, Paraguay, Colombia, Israel, and multiple other nations.

The collapse also impacted small businesses, some of which were forced to close or experienced a significant loss of revenue due to road closures and the limited access occasioned by the state of emergency. This, of course, came on the heels of COVID-related closures and restrictions. Traffic delays into and out of Surfside also impacted residents’ own abilities to move freely about or access their homes.

The full impact of the South Tower's collapse will likely not be known for some time. However, there is no doubt that this incident will forever change the Town of Surfside.

III. THE TOWN'S RESPONSE

Our role as Surfside's outside crisis management team has given us a unique perspective into the Town of Surfside and the abilities of its professional staff. In preparing this report, we spoke with several members of the Town's staff about their experiences, especially in the hours following the collapse. While each person we spoke with offered a different perspective based on their role, they all agreed on one important point. Every member of the staff acted with dedication, focus, and professionalism. Surfside's Human Resources Director, Yamileth Slate-Cloud, summarized it best: "There was no hierarchy. Everyone just rolled up their sleeves and got to work."

A. First on the Scene

Thirty-one. This is the number of sworn law enforcement officers employed by the Town of Surfside Police Department. Three of these officers make up the senior command staff. These numbers are important for a variety of reasons. As a member of the command staff pointed out, "we did the work of three hundred with just thirty officers." Shortly after the collapse, this small group of dedicated professionals went on "Alpha-Bravo" status, working twelve-hour shifts with no days off.

Although the collapse site would quickly be flooded with first responders from Miami-Dade County and other municipalities across Florida and around the world, Surfside's Police Department handled the initial response immediately following the collapse. These officers were on the scene within minutes of the collapse; they were among the first to survey the scene; they responded to cries for help from residents trapped in the still-standing portion of the structure; they guided survivors away from the site towards Surfside's community center which would soon become the family reunification center; they identified potential witnesses who might be critical to the subsequent investigation; they managed traffic and secured the perimeter; and they provided a great deal of support to those who had been affected by this tragedy. In the days and weeks that followed, Surfside's Police Department supported Miami-Dade Fire Rescue's mission and worked closely with other agencies in their mission at the site.

While small in comparison to some of its neighboring jurisdictions, Surfside's law enforcement officers played an out-sized role in responding to the Champlain Towers South collapse. Their ability to do so much with only a limited number of sworn law enforcement officers and resources is a prime example of how a small police department can leverage the expertise of its officers, its relationships with neighboring jurisdictions, and its advanced planning for other critical incidents to deal with the unexpected.

We learned, for example, that the senior command staff boasts significant experience in responding to critical incidents. These senior officers bring decades of experience from much larger municipalities where they responded to critical situations like mass shootings and critical

incidents. This combined experience allowed the command staff to quickly organize officers in order to aid the initial search and rescue efforts. Our discussion with them also revealed the extent to which Surfside's Police Department has cultivated relationships with other police departments. Chief Julio Yero is active in the Miami-Dade County Association of Chiefs of Police. He is also involved with a group of Chiefs of Police that represents the island communities surrounding Surfside in northeastern Miami-Dade County. This smaller organization meets on a regular basis to discuss issues that are unique to this coastal area of the county. The connections forged through his membership in these organizations helped Chief Yero secure assistance and support for Surfside in the immediate aftermath of the collapse.

If there is one lesson to be learned from the police department's experience, it is "be good to your big brother." As Chief Yero and his senior staff members reiterated, they could not have managed the collapse site on their own. Due to mutual aid agreements and other relationships that provide county oversight for critical incidents, the Surfside Police Department had to relinquish all control to Miami-Dade County and their fire rescue and police departments. This "big brother" handled the heavy-lifting and significant expense while still assisting Surfside. While the county was in control, Surfside became one piece of a larger and structured response. This organizational structure required the Surfside Police Department and certain members of the Town's administration to work within a designated lane of traffic in support of the county's larger operation.

The strong contacts these officers have developed with their counterparts across the county helped them help the residents of Surfside during this catastrophe. This is also an important lesson for other municipalities like Surfside. While towns like Surfside enjoy a certain degree of independence, they also rely heavily on the support of the county and other larger municipalities. The Surfside Police Department's experience here demonstrates the value of strong relationships across jurisdictional lines.

B. Food, Water & Shelter

At the site of the collapse, Andrew Hyatt, the Town Manager, and Jason Green, the Deputy Town Manager, began to mobilize their resources. Overnight calls went out to employees, many of whom lived outside Surfside, for help. Mr. Hyatt recalls how his team leapt into action asking in his initial telephone calls, "how can I help." Once he arrived on the scene, Mr. Hyatt was shocked by what he saw. "There were people walking towards me, covered in dust, some wearing barely any clothes."

Standing at the site, Mr. Hyatt recalled a card he had given his daughter. He remembered the image of a ferocious lion on the card meant to evoke a parent's love for their child. Mr. Hyatt told us that that image was in his mind and provided him with strength and comfort. He knew that the entire world was with Surfside and would be ready to help in this unprecedented disaster.

In the hours that followed the collapse, Messrs. Hyatt and Green worked to open the community center with the help of Tim Milian, the Director of Parks and Recreation. The center would become a meeting point for survivors and their families as well as a resource center to help those who had been impacted by the collapse. Eventually, Mr. Hyatt would remain on the site of

the collapse to coordinate with the county, while Mr. Green went to the community center to manage the Town's initial support efforts for survivors and victims' families.

Yamileth Slate-McCloud, Surfside's Human Resources Director, remembers receiving the initial telephone call from Mr. Hyatt. "We have a building collapse," Mrs. Slate-McCloud recalled hearing over the telephone, "how quickly can you get here?" Mr. Hyatt assigned Mrs. Slate-McCloud the important task of securing hotel rooms for survivors and their families.

While no one at Surfside ever prepared for, much less imagined, a disaster of this nature, the staff had extensively trained to respond to hurricanes. Heading towards Surfside, Mrs. Slate-McCloud recalled that she would be in charge of procuring food and water if a storm were heading their way. As she drove, Sandra N. McCready, the Town Clerk, called her on the telephone. Mrs. McCready asked how she could help. Both women divided up responsibilities. Mrs. McCready took over the search for hotel rooms, while Mrs. Slate-McCloud picked up food and water.

Arriving at Publix around 3:30 a.m. and unable to get inside, Mrs. Slate-McCloud dialed the store's manager. "We need water," Mrs. Slate-McCloud remembered saying. A store employee eventually let Mrs. Slate-McCloud inside and she started filling shopping carts with water and snacks. Supplies in hand, she drove to the community center which was quickly becoming a meeting point for survivors, first-responders, and town employees. There were so many people that Mrs. Slate-McCloud had to carefully maneuver so as not to step on anyone. She vividly remembers a mother crying because she could not find her nine-year-old child. Mrs. Slate-McCloud's own child had just celebrated his ninth birthday.

Once inside the community center, Mrs. Slate-McCloud realized that clothing, blankets, and towels would soon be in high demand. "People were covered in dust, and some had very little clothing on," remembered Mrs. Slate-McCloud. She grabbed what she could find throughout the community center and handed it out to those in need. Mrs. Slate-McCloud even brought over a coffeemaker from nearby Town Hall. There can be no doubt that Mrs. Slate-McCloud's attention to these small details brought immeasurable relief in those early hours.

At around 6:00 a.m., the Red Cross arrived and Mrs. Slate-McCloud, along with Tim Milian, the Director of Parks and Recreation, began registering survivors at the community center who might need a hotel room. During these early hours, Mrs. Slate-McCloud also served as an interpreter, helping survivors communicate with the Red Cross and government representatives in both English and Spanish. She would work until almost 9:00 p.m. that first day.

Tim Milian remembers the chaos of that morning vividly. As soon as people started to stream into the Community Center, the Parks & Recreation team sprang into action, helping people to get comfortable. They gave out every towel and mat they had. People were sitting and sleeping everywhere. Many arrived with little clothing. Tim remembers the gravity of the situation; people were crying, they were afraid and confused. "We did our best with what we had to comfort them," he said. In addition to distributing food, water, and clothing, the Parks and Recreation team offered hugs, shoulders to cry on, and ears to bend as they listened to the harrowing experiences of the survivors. "It was quite emotional for our team, but we held it together the best

we could until operations of the Family Assistance Center were turned over to the County and Red Cross.”

Mrs. Slate-McCloud remembers going home the night of the disaster, showering, and quickly falling asleep. At 6:00 a.m. the next day, she woke up and returned to Surfside. Long days and even longer nights would become the new routine for Surfside’s employees as they grappled with the unfolding tragedy.

C. Safeguarding the Town’s Infrastructure

While Mrs. Slate-McCloud raced towards Surfside shortly after the disaster, her colleague, Randy Stokes, the Director of Public Works, had already arrived at the scene. He mobilized staff members for the response and assisted in the opening of the community center. His carts were used to transport survivors. Mr. Stokes described the area of the collapse as “eerie”; it was “like nothing he had ever seen.” According to Mr. Stokes, his initial concern was the water to the collapsed building. “We didn’t want to turn off the water unless the county or fire department told us to do so.” That order came between 3:45 and 4:00 a.m. Mr. Stokes and his Public Works team had to dig into the rubble to find the valves so that they could shut off the water. Mr. Stokes was also involved in delivering and operating Town of Surfside heavy equipment at the disaster site in support of the Miami-Dade Fire Rescue Incident Commander.

Mr. Stokes then turned his focus to the day’s other priorities. To the extent possible, Surfside would continue with its normal solid waste pick-up schedule. Trash would become a major issue for the Town in short order. As Mr. Stokes put it, the trash generated by the emergency response became “its own little monster.” Mr. Stokes’ team picked up trash by the dumpster-load from the community center and the collapse site every thirty minutes. Because the county’s own vehicles were too large to get into the tent cities housing the first responders, Mr. Stokes used the Town’s smaller utility vehicles to remove the trash. This was a continuous operation. Within the first fifteen days following the disaster, the Public Works Department removed an estimated forty-one tons of trash generated by the first responders and others directly related to the disaster response.

In the aftermath of the disaster, the Public Works Department inspected key components of Surfside’s water and sewer infrastructure, including all of the pump stations to check for blockages. Mr. Stokes’ team also provided direct support to the county in the early hours following the collapse by deploying its vehicles, especially its fuel truck and utility carts, to the operation and transporting barriers to the site. They also made important modifications to local streets to help with traffic.

The Public Works Department has reason to be proud of its efforts following the collapse. However, if there is one area where Mr. Stokes and his team truly excelled, it was in the lead-up to the controlled demolition of the remaining portion of the Champlain Towers South structure. While the news media focused on the building itself, Mr. Stokes and his team concentrated on the potential impact the demolition could have on Surfside’s water and sewer infrastructure. The underground water main lies just three feet below Collins Avenue. If something went wrong with the collapse of the remaining structure and the water line was compromised, it could have resulted in yet another calamity. The same held true for the sewer line. A break there would have impacted

multiple, nearby municipalities. To address this very dangerous situation, Mr. Stokes and his team came up with a simple, yet effective plan. By dumping truckloads of dirt onto the area of Collins Avenue that would be most vulnerable during the demolition, the Public Works Department created a “pillow of dirt” that would cushion or block the impact of any falling debris during the demolition.

D. Technology

Communications are essential in a critical situation. To maintain communications, however, you need technology. Enter Jose Feliz. Shortly before 3:00 a.m., Captain John Healy of the Surfside Police Department called Mr. Feliz. “A building collapsed and there are a lot of casualties,” Mr. Feliz remembers being told. Upon arrival, Mr. Feliz set up emergency telephone lines so that residents would have access to the latest information. Next, he went to the site of the collapse to see if police officers at the scene needed anything.

After returning from the site, Mr. Feliz worked with Malarie Dauginikas, Surfside’s Community Services & Public Communications Director, to set up website alerts. He also procured additional cell phones and mobile hot spots to facilitate communications. Working with key vendors, Mr. Feliz secured equipment necessary to increase the available bandwidth. He also set up additional printers for use by town and county employees and began printing identification cards and provided building access fobs for first responders and other staff. Mr. Feliz worked closely with Sandra N. McCready, the Town Clerk, to address the public records requests that began flooding into Surfside. In addition to these essential tasks, Mr. Feliz recovered video recordings taken from cameras at the community center as well as the tennis center for use by the police and other investigators. Mr. Feliz also downloaded audio recordings of telephone calls from the Town’s dispatch line in connection with public records requests. In addition, he was responsible for downloading employee text messages and locating specific emails from the Town’s servicer in connection with voluminous public records requests.

E. Supporting Employees

Not long after the collapse, Surfside’s Human Resources Director, Yamileth Slate-McCloud, realized that the Town’s employees were under tremendous pressure. Not only were they working around the clock, but many were trying to process their own feelings of grief, fear, and anger. The collapse clearly had touched every single member of the community in profound ways.

Many of the Town’s employees knew of someone who lost their life or was missing following the collapse. For others, simply visiting the site evoked very strong emotions, especially in the hours immediately following the collapse. Weeks later, Mrs. Slate-McCloud recalls the impact those visits had on her. She remembers “the horrible smell, the smoke, the dust . . .” Jose Feliz, who heads information technology for Surfside described the situation as “rough.” Randy Stokes described the situation as “unimaginable.”

Recognizing the psychological strain her employees were facing, Mrs. Slate-McCloud contacted Surfside’s healthcare broker shortly after the collapse. She set up mental health counseling for employees and took other steps, like inviting teams of therapy dogs to the various

locations where Surfside employees were working, to offer some much-needed support. Mrs. Slate-Cloud's decision to quickly deploy the tools necessary to support Surfside's employees is laudable. In addition, Mrs. Slate-McCloud coordinated donations from different members of the community from massage therapists and chiropractors who offered their services, to donations of vitamin B12 shots, food and water, and even toilet paper and wet wipes, all of which offered Surfside's employees the support they needed while working to help the community around the clock.

F. Public Records

Sandra N. McCready, the Town Clerk, also received a call in the early morning hours of the disaster. Mrs. McCready went directly to Surfside where, in her words, she was left "speechless" by what she saw when she arrived. Initially, Mrs. McCready worked to find hotel rooms for the survivors who were arriving at the community center. However, Mrs. McCready soon realized that the Town was about to be flooded with public records requests connected to the disaster. She was right.

One of the first requests came from Miami-Dade County Fire Rescue. The Fire Department asked for floor plans for the Champlain Tower South. Those plans were provided by Surfside's Building Official, James McGuinness, in both electronic and paper format. By 8:00 a.m., Mrs. McCready recalled that the town was receiving a massive amount of public records requests by electronic mail. Although Mrs. McCready and Evelyn Herbello, the Deputy Town Clerk, felt overwhelmed, they were able to upload thousands of pages of public records to Surfside's public website on a continuous basis. In fact, despite its small staff, the Clerk's Office has responded to approximately eighty-five to ninety-five percent of the public records requests received within the first thirty days after the disaster.

At some point on the day of the incident, Mrs. McCready and her team, along with Building Department officials, visited an external storage unit located in Sunny Isles Beach to search for records relating to the Champlain Towers South condominium. The plans that were located were sent to an outside vendor for digitization and were later uploaded to the Town's website. The Clerk and Building Officials returned the following Sunday to the external storage unit to search for more records. Over the course of five hours inside that storage unit, the Clerk and her team went through approximately eighty boxes of records. The search was not easy. Mrs. McCready and her team found that the records were not stored in any easy-to-identify fashion. Records were logged by permit number which required that the staff go through every box and file to ascertain what records were kept. These records were brought back to Town Hall where they were categorized by address. The records were then transferred to the Building Department for digitization by the Town's outside vendor, Blue Digital.

Although Mrs. McCready and her team worked quickly to upload public records to the Town's website, their progress was soon slowed by certain technological limitations. The weight of the data files quickly swamped the Town's outdated website, rendering it unstable. Uploads were failing and material that had already been uploaded was disappearing. To rapidly address the situation, Mrs. McCready and Ms. Dauginikas worked with outside vendors to determine the fastest way to set-up a secondary website that could handle the massive amounts of data being

uploaded. Several vendors were asked to provide solutions which took a few days. Ms. Dauginikas selected the vendor and coordinated the design and implementation of the disaster-specific website. According to Mrs. McCready, the launch of this website was “rocky” but manageable. Eventually, Mrs. McCready was able to continue uploading records without incident, facilitating the public’s access.

G. Dollars and Cents

Javier Collazo, the Finance Director, explained that in the hours after the collapse his department established a project code for the disaster so that all related expenses could be accurately tracked. Working with an outside vendor, Mr. Collazo took steps to ensure that all documentation prepared by the town would be consistent with the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s (“FEMA”) requirements for reimbursement of costs associated with the current state of emergency. Mr. Collazo also ensured that all emergency vendors retained by the Town Manager for purposes of this emergency were quickly paid. Additionally, Mr. Collazo continues to work with Surfside’s insurance carrier, FMIT, to determine to what extent any damage to infrastructure will be covered. Whatever is not covered by FMIT will be submitted to FEMA for reimbursement. Finally, Mr. Collazo noted that he has “been touched” by the many donations made to Surfside including checks in small denominations clearly sent by retirees from other parts of the country. All checks received have been turned over to supportsurfside.org.

IV. THE JOINT INFORMATION CENTER

Surfside retained TND the Monday after the Champlain Towers South partial collapse to support Malarie Dauginikas, the Community Services & Public Communications Director. Like many other departments, Surfside’s public information office was not equipped to handle the onslaught of media requests, questions from the public, and other related communications activities. Even if Surfside had employed twice or three times the number of public information officers, it would still have struggled to keep up with the volume of demands.

To manage the overwhelming need to obtain and disseminate timely and accurate information, TND immediately established a Joint Information Center (“JIC”) within Town Hall. A JIC is designed to provide key stakeholders with critical information in real time. To ensure that Surfside’s JIC had access to all of the latest information, TND leveraged the resources available to the Town during the declared state of emergency. These resources, as further described below, included:

- subject-matter experts crisis communications who were able to work directly with key personnel within Surfside, including the Town Manager, Assistant Town Manager, and the Town Attorney;
- trained public information officers who collected and disseminated information to the media and the public;
- videographers who created informative content for Surfside’s television channel and social media outlets;
- graphics designers who created images and other visual aids to better transmit information to the public;

- outside companies arranged through the Florida Department of Emergency Management who lent the Town's JIC the latest Apple iPhones that were assigned to various staff members so that they could capture video and photographs that would help keep the public informed;
- bilingual telephone operators (the hotline) who collected, categorized, and tracked media inquiries from local, national, and international news outlets; and
- website developers who advised on the creation of a new website that could provide information to the public and sustain the thousands of pages of public records being uploaded on a daily basis.

A core team of crisis management and communications professionals staffed Surfside's JIC and supported Malarie Dauginikas, including Brian Andrews, Carlos F. Gonzalez, and Frank Fernandez. This team was also supported by several other individuals who rotated in throughout our engagement, including Jilda Unruh, Joel Gordon, Aston Bright, Mike Jachles, Frank Trigueros (from Surfside), Andres Hernandez, and Miguel Gutierrez. The JIC also was temporarily home to a FEMA media relations representative for several days.

A. The Hotline

TND believes that the use of a hotline provided Surfside with a significant tool to track, respond to, and otherwise engage with the media as well as the public. The hotline consisted of a telephone number (305-548-8351), published on the Town's website and circulated in an email to all Town employees by the Town Manager's office. The media and public contacted with questions, requests for interviews, and access to public records. At Ms. Dauginikas' request and with Mr. Hyatt's approval, the hotline operated from 9:00 am to 11:00 pm, seven days a week.

A live operator greeted each person who contacted the hotline. The operator took down information that TND pre-determined would be essential to screening and prioritizing incoming media and public requests. Each call resulted in a digital ticket sent by the hotline operator to the JIC. The ticket included the name of the caller, media affiliation, contact information, request, and desired timeframe for a response.

Upon receipt, the JIC staff would review the ticket, obtain the necessary information, and provide a response to the caller. Through this system, Surfside's JIC responded to dozens upon dozens of requests from the media as well as members of the community. More importantly, this method allowed Surfside to develop important relationships with the media, providing accurate and timely information, and quickly correcting any rumors and false information.

B. The Website

Surfside's existing website at the time of the collapse could not handle the demands made for thousands of pages of public records that needed to be accessible to both the media and the public. It was at risk of failing. TND worked with Surfside to identify potential vendors and solutions for a disaster-specific website as a temporary solution to ensure that the public would receive timely and accurate information. Working with Ms. Dauginikas, we made recommendations on necessary functionalities that would assist in expanding the website's technical or back-end capacity so that

it could handle the additional “weight” of tens of thousands of pages of public records that were being uploaded on a continuous basis. TND also offered recommendations as to content including resources, support, and volunteer opportunities. Finally, we recommended that the disaster-specific website be used to funnel media inquiries to the hotline so that they could be tracked and managed as noted above. Ms. Dauginikas made the ultimate decision to retain Boost Media Productions, a company with a presence in Florida.

C. Creating Timely and Informative Content In-House

In times of crisis, the public must be kept informed as to what government is doing on their behalf. The directive from Mr. Hyatt was “complete and total transparency.” To better update our residents, TND leveraged Surfside’s existing and additional resources to create meaningful and valuable content. These resources included the Town’s website, NextDoor, PEG Channel, printed newsletter, electronic signs, and other platforms. TND helped Ms. Dauginikas to produce a series of videos that were updated on an ongoing basis to provide emergency information regarding traffic and other available disaster-relief services. These videos were included on Surfside’s various platforms and included police officers and employees from other departments.

In addition to using TND’s camera crews, we also enlisted other staff members like Surfside Police Sgt Jay Matelis, to shoot their own videos. We provided staff members with state-of-the-art iPhones which were donated for the Town’s temporary use. Sergeant Matelis, for example, shot a number of videos providing on-the-spot traffic updates as well as other pieces highlighting the work of our police officers on those devices.

D. Producing Content for the Media

TND worked with the media to highlight the incredible work of Surfside’s staff in the aftermath of this disaster. Two pieces stand out in particular. The first piece centered on the first Surfside police officers who arrived on the scene following the collapse. These interviews were powerful, providing the public with a first-hand account of the tragedy in the moments following the disaster.

The officers told a riveting story during the media gaggle arranged by TND. These officers shared their compassion and dedication to the community. TND conceived of the storyline, prepared the officers to speak on camera, and arranged the media opportunity. Several news outlets sent camera crews to Town Hall for this significant event. It was the first time that Surfside’s first responders (who were first to the scene) put a human face on this tragedy and the impact it had on each of them personally. This piece, along with several other stories TND produced in-house, highlighted Surfside’s Police Department.

Without question, this tragedy took a toll on the police as well as other members of the community. The second piece TND helped produce illustrated the steps taken by Surfside to care for its own employees during this difficult time. Surfside’s Human Resources Director and one of its police officers spoke about the steps taken to help employees cope with the tragedy’s aftermath, from meeting with licensed mental health counselors, to the use of therapy dogs. TND pitched this story to Spanish-language news outlets since both staff members were fluent in Spanish.

While we have highlighted these stories in particular, there are numerous other instances where TND helped shape storylines, offered the media useful and accurate information, and provided background information.

Notably, TND arranged for various media opportunities for the Town's elected officials. These opportunities were orchestrated with the assistance of Mr. Hyatt and gave the elected officials a local, national, and international platform to address their concerns and to advocate for their constituents. TND also prepared video news releases that were shared with various media outlets that incorporated these materials into their news stories.

E. Information Gathering and Briefings

TND arranged to have a daily brief with Surfside Police at 7:00 a.m. to stay abreast of overnight developments. This information would be disseminated to the Town of Surfside JIC as well as members of the professional staff and elected officials. Communication with the elected officials was sometimes hampered by cell service limitations at Town Hall as well as other factors outside of TND's control. Nevertheless, TND believes that it was able to develop an "open-door" policy with the Town's elected officials. Indeed, TND's core team spent time with each of the elected officials, providing them with new information and arranging media appearances as warranted.

Throughout the day, JIC members attended briefings held by local, state, and national agencies in order to ensure that Surfside received the latest information. As a result of both his background and credibility as a former law enforcement officer, Frank Fernandez, had a regular presence at the command center from which he provided the JIC critical information on a real-time basis. The Surfside JIC monitored the Facebook Live feeds from Miami-Dade Police on regular briefings. JIC members also visited the Family Assistance Center at the Seaview Hotel and participated in briefings provided by the Red Cross to survivors and victims' family members.

F. Media Training

As of this writing, nearly every member of Surfside's professional staff has given interviews to the media. By and large, most of the employees here had not previously found themselves in front of television cameras or answering a reporter's questions. We scheduled interviews and helped prepare each employee for potential questions, particularly Surfside's Building Official, James McGuinness, Human Resources Director, Yamileth Slate-McCloud, as well as various members of the Police Department.

The majority of the elected officials handled media requests on their own without our direct involvement. Although the scope of our services to the Town did not include providing the elected officials with daily or personal communications services, we did work with each member of the commission on a regular basis. Some commissioners engaged with our team more than others. While some of the elected officials took our calls and responded to our outreach, others did not. Likewise, while some of the elected officials followed our recommendations with respect to media engagement, others followed a different path. Nevertheless, we worked hard to ensure that we provided the same information and opportunities to each elected official. Our team made contact

in person and by telephone with all of the Town’s elected officials. TND made it a point to reach out to all of the elected officials to report on significant developments with respect to the collapse when provided by the county, and to advise on potential media opportunities at the collapse site, Town Hall, via Zoom, and by telephone.

G. Inter-Governmental Affairs

TND leveraged its experience managing previous crisis situations in and for local governments to open effective communications channels to ensure the JIC’s successful operation. Specifically, working relationships were created with key personnel at the local, state, and national levels to facilitate communications and fill information gaps created by “silos” operating throughout the county’s response. We worked with Rachel Johnson at the Miami-Dade County Mayor’s Office; Alvaro Zabaleta with the Miami-Dade Police Department; Erika Benitez at Miami-Dade Fire Rescue; Ignatius Carroll, Executive Officer of City of Miami Fire Rescue and a member of Urban Search and Rescue Team 2; Ramiro Inguanzo, President of the Miami-Dade City and County Managers’ Association; Samantha Bequer with the Florida Department of Emergency Management; Crystal Paulk-Buchanan at the Federal Emergency Management Agency; Jesse Rosen with the White House Advance Team for the specific purpose of obtaining photographs of the President’s visit to Surfside for the Town Manager; and Isidoro Lopez, Chief of Staff for the Chairman of the Miami-Dade County Board of Commissioners. We also leveraged our contacts in the surrounding municipalities of Miami Beach, Bal Harbour Village, North Miami, North Miami Beach, Sunny Isles Beach, and Aventura.

TND also made use of its working knowledge (acquired through experience managing other critical incidents) of Florida’s WebEOC emergency management software system to assist Surfside in entering resource requests during the state of emergency.

V. ROOM FOR GROWTH

Surfside should be proud of the way its staff managed a critical situation for which there was no playbook. An event of this nature, however, also provides an important learning opportunity. From our own assessment, as well as our conversations with various staff members, we believe that Surfside should consider implementing the following recommendations in order to prepare for potential crises in the future. We should note that these recommendations will not only help Surfside tackle future critical situations, but also improve daily operations. As noted above, a formal after-action report would likely contain a more detailed action plan that would provide detailed analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threat (referred to as a “S.W.O.T.” analysis). These recommendations, while falling outside the parameters of a S.W.O.T. analysis should nevertheless offer some guidance for improving the Town’s response to critical incidents in the future.

In no particular order, we offer the following areas we believe may help Surfside better manage its critical operations now and in the future:

- **Improve Staff Cooperation:** Surfside must make a concerted effort to create a stronger culture of cooperation between its various departments. TND noticed the

existence of a rigid “silo mentality” during our engagement. While we understand that each department has its own duties and responsibilities, all staff should be working together towards a common mission. Although we believe that the senior staff shares this philosophy, it has not trickled down to all levels of the organization. We think that additional steps should be taken to expand the culture of accountability to all employees. Put simply, employees need to own their work. Town Hall should not be a place where people come to mark time until the end of the day. We believe that the Human Resources Department should play a significant role here if, as further explained below, there is sufficient staffing to accommodate this additional mission.

- **Additional Staffing:** We repeatedly heard that there was not enough staff to handle all of the various tasks, projects, and assignments occasioned by the collapse. Additionally, we understand that there is a backlog of work in certain departments which originated under prior administrations, but which nevertheless must be completed now. Staff members wear multiple hats and the demand on their time to accomplish all of their many responsibilities is too great for one person or a couple of people alone. We recommend that Surfside conduct a top-down audit of its current staff, their duties, and whether additional support is required. Additionally, we urge Surfside to consider planning for a surge in demand for staff, including specialized staff, and that it be prepared to staff-up in case of an emergency or other critical incident.
 - The Town Clerk must review approximately 700 recorded calls to determine if they need to be redacted prior to their release. Only one person is currently available to perform this task and Surfside does not have the necessary software to automate this process. Additionally, the Town Clerk must review records that were never scanned to identify any personal identifying information that must be removed under Florida law.
 - The Community Services and Public Communications Department is also understaffed. Ms. Dauginikas needs the support of a videographer and graphics designer to facilitate communications.
 - The demands on the Town’s Information Technology Department were overwhelming for one person.
 - The Human Resources Department should be expanded beyond its current single employee.
 - The Building Official will require support in communicating complex information to the media and the public.
 - A receptionist who answers Town Hall’s main telephone line should be contracted.
- **Improved Inter-Governmental Coordination:** We recommend that Surfside require that each of its department heads and senior staff members develop strong professional relationships with their counterparts in the surrounding municipalities as well as Miami-Dade County and the State of Florida. If there was one glaring failure we can point to, it is the lack of effective communication, cooperation, and

coordination between Surfside and Miami-Dade County, with the exception of the Town's Police Department, as noted above. While we do not lay the blame for this with Surfside, we do believe that the Town can do more to foster relationships now that will allow key staff members access in the future should it be required.

- The Town Clerk has explained that it was difficult to determine which public records to release given the lack of clarity from Miami-Dade County as to the nature of the investigation (this being an important factor in determining whether records are exempt from disclosure under Florida law).
 - Ms. Dauginikas did not have the opportunity to fully participate in available briefings for public information officers until TND positioned her as Town's primary point of contact for such briefings with the County.
 - Beyond developing external relationships, there should be additional cooperation between the various departments within the Town to facilitate communications and action during emergency situations.
- **Additional Critical Incident Training:** Surfside trains for hurricanes and active shooters. We urge that Surfside create additional training materials to deal with other potential scenarios, including building collapses. Although we all hope that this will never happen again, the lessons that the staff have learned as a result of this critical incident should be memorialized. Surfside, for better or for worse, is now in the position to offer training, guidance, and support to other municipalities. But it is also in a position to revisit, modify, and expand its own training materials to account for the lessons learned here.
 - **Elected Official Training:** Surfside should work with the elected officials regarding how best they can help the Town during a critical incident. This training should include a focus on their duties on the Town's Charter documents as well as how their duties may be impacted during a state of emergency when the county or other larger entity assumes control. There should be an established process dictating regular call-ins and briefing times for elected officials so that everyone is informed while taking care to adhere to Florida's Sunshine Law requirements.
 - **Improve Access to Public Records:** The Town should complete the digitization of all public records as soon as possible. This includes all documents currently held by the Building Department. Going forward, all records should be immediately scanned. Records should be made readily and easily accessible to the public. Additionally licenses and training should be acquired to facilitate the handling of public records. Additionally, all staff members should be provided with training as to what constitutes a public record, the many ways in which public records are created, and their obligations with respect to preserving public records.
 - **Improved Technology:** Surfside's information technology infrastructure is lacking, even for a Town of this size. We understand that Surfside will be developing a new website, beyond the current site in place for several years and the bridge site set up specific to this incident. This new permanent site is essential,

especially given the obvious limitations with the current site. The original website simply could not handle the number of public records that needed to be uploaded. Beyond the website, the Town should take steps to expand its network capabilities. Surfside should also acquire more hard assets, including laptops, cell phones, and mobile hotspots to facilitate work outside Town Hall. Surfside should also have the equipment necessary to produce its own video content quickly and effectively. We recommend that the Town procure video equipment, editing software, and the training and/or personnel necessary to produce such content. A full-time Emergency Operations Center should also be set-up instead of an as needed set up in the Police Training Room. We urge that the Town establish its own unilateral EOC as soon as possible. Whether in a crisis like this one, or in the aftermath of a major storm, the Town's employees should have the ability to continue working and collaborating in a modern, technologically-equipped work space.

VI. CONCLUSION

A crisis of this nature takes a personal toll on Town staff. In the immediate aftermath of a devastating event such as the Champlain Towers South collapse, the combination of emotion, adrenaline, and lack of sleep can quickly impact performance. The team at Town Hall, however, handled this situation with professionalism and compassion. However, the human body and mind can only operate in this heightened state for a brief period before there are problems. We strongly encourage the Town to pay close attention to the mental and physical aspects of this disaster on staff, devise a plan to retain key employees, and exit those staff members who do not share the Town Manager's vision for the future. In the days, weeks, and months that follow, the Town of Surfside will have the opportunity to not only grow from this experience but become local and national leaders in a variety of areas essential the management of critical incidents like this one.