

The Miami-Dade Surfside Building Collapse: What to Expect

When managing the response and recovery of a collapsed building it is perhaps a bit easier to think of the overall process in functional areas. Before that, it is key to remember that there will be many different responding agencies and political staff at the local, state, national and international level involved, as well as the owners of the building, insurers and, eventually, lawyers and family associations, staff within the agencies will come and go. But there are and will forever be the survivors and the families who need to see these different responders as a single system, one focused on helping them recover and transition to what will be the new normal for them. In other words, the names and acronyms on the backs of the jackets and uniforms don't matter, what matters is learning the names and needs of the families.

1. Recovery (Building Site)

- a. Search and rescue of survivors – these efforts will take several days. It is extremely dangerous and moves very slowly and will require reinforcements or relief teams likely to come from around the US. These teams are called Urban Search and Rescue (USAR). They will likely cease operations when there is no further likely chance of rescue.
- b. As the search for the living begins to end, the recovery of the deceased, which involves the removal of debris, will start. There has to be a plan on who will undertake this part of the operation, and it will likely last months. Here, the focus will be on finding:
 - i. Deceased (both human and animal)
 - ii. Personal effects (those will be important to survivors and families)
 - iii. Investigations' needs
- c. Stabilization of the remaining parts of the building
 - i. That structure will be monitored 24 / 7, looking for any movement or risk to those working on the collapsed areas.
 - ii. Need to recover personal property, if possible. There will certainly be a request from residents for that.
- d. Considerations to keep in mind:
 - i. South Florida has entered an active hurricane season. When a storm approaches, it will affect the recovery operations and stability of the non-collapsed portion of the building.
 - ii. All of this is very person-power intensive and will require shift scheduling, rest and rehabilitation periods and rotations, as well as mental health debriefings. No one on site will return home the same way they deployed.

2. Social Services – Taking Care of the Living

- a. Building a list of the missing. This involves talking to survivors and public outreach – domestic and international, and it will take some time. Some people may not be reported missing for a while, until friends and family realize that their loved ones may have been in the building.
- b. Collecting antemortem records of those missing people, as well as familial DNA references that will be used by the Miami-Dade Medical Examiner for the identification.
- c. Organizing assistance for survivors, some of whom may be family members of the missing, with a plan for immediate, middle and long-term support and transition.
 - i. Mental health support – this a terrifying event and will likely have a long-term impact on everyday life. For some, simply walking by a high-rise will trigger vivid memories.
 - ii. Finding housing (it took over a year for some survivors of Grenfell fire to get housing). You must consider that some may not want to go into a high-rise or concrete structures.
 - iii. Replacing documents – identifications cards, immigration documents, legal documents, banking information, etc.
 - iv. Organizing transfer, or cease of billing systems, that are automatic and will go to collections – utility, taxes, condominium associations, etc.
 - v. Setting up temporary addresses, not tied to transient or short-term hotels that will change every few days.
- d. Conducting briefings for survivors and family members, with capability of remote call-in, should be conducted daily to explain the various processes (recovery, ID, investigations), set expectations on timelines, and explain or provide a central location for support services.
- e. Organizing site visits – as the rescue operations move to recovery, and the realization that the recovery may take months, families may start to gather at / near the site and a plan should be drafted to create space for a memorial and safe area for visiting that is beyond public access but not in harm's way.

3. Investigations

- a. Determining why the building collapsed will require a detailed and complex investigation, one involving multiple parties. The investigation will involve reviewing documents - building plans, permits, previous inspections; testing of recovered material from the collapse; review and study of any video of the collapse; interviewing people who worked on the building and who completed prior inspections; and survivors. These are all related but separate areas of investigation which then need to be brought together for review and, at some point, likely for a public hearing. This will take time, over a year and likely longer.
- b. Simultaneously, the condominium association, individual owners and / or their insurers will also want to understand what happened and may bring in their own experts to start a separate but parallel investigation.
- c. What this means is that actions taken now in documenting the recovery and the movement of debris and partially standing support beams are important to note for the investigations.
- d. There will also be a lot of talking heads, speculating on the cause of the collapse, and very few people talking about the investigative process, including the potential timeline which will be far more helpful to the survivors and their families.
- e. There are many examples of protracted investigations and litigation for fires, building collapses and the processes involved. A good example would be the collapse of a walkway in a Kansas City (Missouri) Hyatt Regency on July 17th, 1981, which killed 114 people. Recovery there, I think, was accomplished faster than it will be here. That collapse caused the largest number of deaths from a nonintentional building failure in the US, which sadly, with the number of missing here, is likely to be eclipsed.
- f. Keeping in mind that there are many high-rise condominiums in South Florida and in the US for that matter, and any immediate risks as well as reassurances should be shared when known.

4. Identification and Release of Deceased

- a. This part of the operation will become key to the families. For many, the recovery and identification of their loved ones will be the point at which they begin the journey of transition, from what was normal to what the new normal will be. For many, it is the point of reality because they can begin to plan funerals. For many, that is an important part of the grieving process and work through the administrative burdens that death brings, with most of those predicated on having a death certificate and a body. Few people really understand what happens from recovery to release, and worse their expectations are based on tv shows, not from reality.
- b. Some considerations:
 - i. Medical Examiner should establish, a long-term family care team with a sole focus on the building collapse to serve as single point of contact for families.
 - ii. Medical Examiner and / or police should start a process to collect antemortem information from families to build a database of records for the missing, along with the collection of familial reference DNA.
 - iii. A team should also be using building map / floorplan, interviewing survivors or people with knowledge to identify likely last known locations of missing persons, to help in their recovery.
 - iv. The Medical Examiner will undoubtedly have a plan to bring in augmentation, forensic and support staff; as well as areas to work, including holding space. Typically, in these events, groups of deceased will be recovered daily over the course of the recovery operation.
 - v. Most of the deceased should be recovered intact; however, some may be damaged during recovery and families should be told this is a possibility.
 - vi. Medical examiner will also have to work to establish the time of death as being the same for everyone, or if determined differently, they should explain to families.
 - vii. There will be focus on numbers as deceased are recovered, identified, and released.
 - viii. Families should be told the process of identification and level of autopsy or examination that will be conducted, so they understand the delays from recovery to release.

- ix. Medical Examiner will have to determine how to deal with those people reported missing, but not recovered, and the issuance of death certificates.

5. Media / Communication

- a. Media reaction will have a fairly typical pattern.
 - i. Starting with coverage gaining momentum from the first reports of the collapse
 - ii. Moving to nonstop coverage of the recovery, with focus on any rescues
 - iii. Interviewing survivors, family members and responders
 - iv. Using talking heads about:
 1. Rescue
 2. Recovery
 3. Speculation on cause
 - v. Focus will shift to:
 1. Why the collapse?
 2. Are other buildings at risk?
 3. Blame
 - vi. As family frustrations mount, those will be touch points for the media.
 - vii. Mistakes in ID or recovery will become topics and should be dealt with directly and clearly so families can have confidence in the system.
- b. Now there is a single story, and it focuses on the work around the collapsed building. Soon it will become several different stories and, in some cases, different agendas. This can be confusing for families because they won't know what to believe or expect.
- c. As operations increase and more agencies become involved, there should be a joint press / information office established with continuity of staff considered. Think of fire (technical rescue), law enforcement, the medical examiner, social services, elected officials, and the overall operation planning teams, priority of information should be:
 - i. Coordination among response agencies
 - ii. Briefings to survivors / family members
 - iii. Public releases
- d. A social media team should be established to focus on survivor / family website and the sharing of community information. They should also be able to quickly address rumors as they are raised.

6. Mediation & Settlements

- a. As it should be, the focus now is on rescue and lifesaving and support to survivors and families. Nonetheless, there is or should be a team focused on planning the next phases of the operations. When planning those, it is important to remember that the actions taken now will have a large impact on the financial, personal and community resolution of the incident.
 - i. As an example, from the 1981 walkway collapse in the Kansas City Hyatt, it was seen that the care or plight of the victims was overshadowed by blame seeking and the intense media coverage. This walkway was in a hotel, but during a gala event, so many locals were there.
- b. Given the large number of missing, it is likely that many in the surrounding communities will have a tie to someone who, at a minimum, lived there in the complex, or directly or indirectly knew a missing person. That makes these disasters, for many beyond the survivors and the families, personal.
- c. Litigation is an extension of rage; civil suits will be likely. In the case of the Hyatt, over 300 civil lawsuits were filed within months.
- d. Unlike a hotel, this is a condominium building which will have individually owned units, rented units and those owned by businesses. This means there will be multiple insurers and their lawyers involved, creating a complex environment for survivors and families to solve compensation issues. Seeking compensation is a hard issue for many, everyone wants what is impossible – for this not to have happened. Because that is not possible, the compensation is for living expenses, replacement of lost income, belongings, and, if covered or a liable party is identified in a policy, for pain and suffering.
- e. All survivors and families share a community in the event, they all lived in the building or lost someone who lived there, but they will likely have very different insurance policies and that will be confusing. Especially because some carriers will treat the loss differently than others.
- f. Because of all of this, I would recommend that, as part of this process, local or state government set up a mediation task force or office to help coordinate response actions, providing a central place for the variety of claims they will receive and standardized processes. The mediation process established after 9/11 is a good example of this.

7. Management

- a. Now that you have an idea of the various functional areas (and there are many more details than I have gone into), you can see that, in the response to the building collapse, there is no single person in charge but, instead, multiple agencies whose roles may overlap. The response to this horrific event is not a day or week-long operation, but one that will take months and years. At this point, I would expect and am confident that the local authorities in Miami-Dade County have, or are, putting a long-term management team in place.
- b. Coordination, accurate information, a clear understanding of the operation (rescue, family assistance, survivor assistance, community care, investigations, recovery, identification and release of the deceased and personal effects, communications, memorials, and what to do with the building site) and what to expect are vital and don't happen without dedicated efforts.
- c. Some considerations for planning should be:
 - i. Establishing a long-term management staff for continuity of operations.
 - ii. Ensuring all actions are coordinated, keeping in mind the various functional areas.
 - iii. Reminding responders that this is a marathon starting out as a sprint and will continue for some time, and people need rest and relief.
 - iv. Having long-range planning taken into account: hurricane season, recovery from COVID and disaster fatigue.
 - v. Neighboring residents will also be impacted, with potentially reduced access to their homes and concern over dangers from debris. While sympathetic to the survivors and families, they will have their own concerns and need to return to normal routines. So, community needs should be part of planning.
 - vi. Quickly addressing family and community concerns is another important planning consideration. It is normal for people to raise questions which can quickly go from being a question to becoming an oft repeated "statement of fact." A robust social media team is vital here.
- d. Sadly, the collapse of this building will likely become the greatest loss of life for a (not intentionally caused) structural collapse in the US. The ramifications of this will go well beyond South Florida and, as such, the lessons learned (or relearned) in response, result of investigations, and media attention will be long-lasting and, therefore, should be coordinated.

8. Memorials

- a. Typically, within the next 7 to 14 days, I would expect a memorial to occur. By then, there should be a clear number of missing, now believed to be deceased as rescues become unlikely. This event should be planned for; it is not a political opportunity and should be multi-denominational and live streamed for families who can't travel to see it.
- b. An area for the public to gather and leave tributes should be established. Those tributes should be collected and preserved over time. They should not be collected and thrown away.
- c. A small area, away from the public, should be established where family members of the missing can view the site and leave tributes also.
- d. Over time, a family association is likely to form and they, along with community leaders – both elected and selected, should start to plan for a one-year anniversary. There are many considerations for this, but that is for later. But, it is important to understand it will happen.