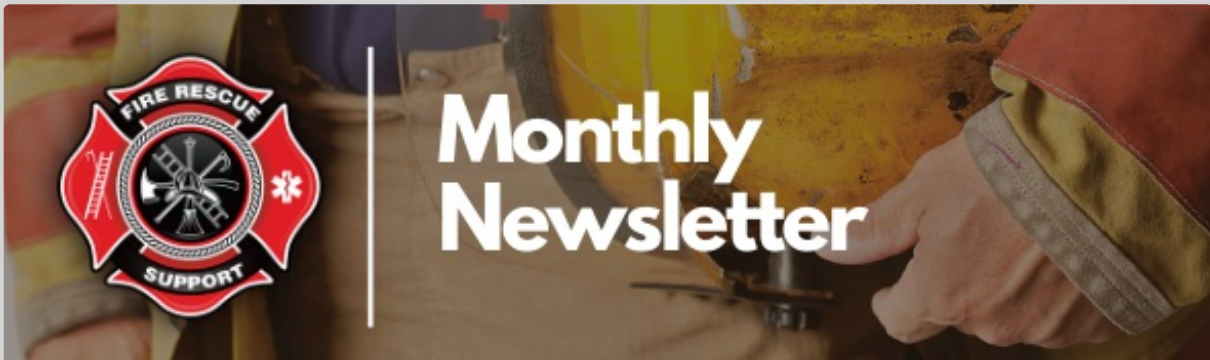


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July 2021



Surfside Condo Collapse

"Heading to Surfside to link up with MDFR Chaplains in support of Fire Rescue personnel. Prayers appreciated!"

That was the first Instagram post I shared at the start of my deployment to Surfside in response to the condominium collapse.

The collapse happened during the early morning hours of Thursday, June 24. On Friday, June 25, I reached out to my fellow fire chaplains who work for Miami-Dade Fire Rescue.

"This is Chaplain Joe from Marion County Fire Rescue. My heart and prayers

are with you. I am out of town, but am available to come down starting Monday."

As I was returning home on Sunday, June 27, I reached out to my chaplain friends to confirm that my assistance was needed. It was on this day that I also found out that Florida Urban Search and Rescue Task Force 8 (FL-TF8) was also being deployed.

I arrived in Miami about 5:00pm on Monday, June 28 and met up with my chaplain contacts. I also connected with Task Force 8.



Florida Task Force 8 has members from Gainesville Fire Rescue, Marion County Fire Rescue, and Ocala Fire Rescue



BOO

This was our BOO (base of operations - don't worry, I had to ask, too). Nothing fancy, but a place to lay down when off duty.

Our shift was from noon to midnight which meant we were up no later than 0800 and didn't get to bed until 0200.

I haven't slept on a cot with a sleeping bag for a number of years, but it didn't really matter. At the end of a long day, anywhere to lay down was fine.

To the world, you may
be one person,
but to one person
you may be
the world.

--Dr. Seuss

Prayer

I don't think Dr. Seuss had prayer in mind when he said this, but I believe it completely applies. Thank you for praying! I absolutely believe our prayers make a difference.

"The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective." James 5:16



Circle Route

After being on site for a couple of days I established a routine. I would circle the collapse area stopping on each of the four sides. All together, I walked 31.3 miles while at Surfside.

The Alpha side of the site was along Collins Avenue. That portion of the building that did not initially collapse (it was later intentionally brought down). This side of the site was where I found some normalcy. You couldn't see the collapse from here; everything looked fine. It was also along Collins Avenue that the initial area for food and refreshment was set up.

The Bravo side was where I could get the best view of the destruction. It was the pool deck of the Bluegreen Vacation Resort where I found a place to sit and reflect. Here I observed crews removing rubble one shovel full at a time. They were focused and passionate about their mission of providing some degree of comfort and closure to the grieving families.

The Charlie side was a lesson in contrasts. As I stood facing west I could see the devastation of the collapse. I looked into the units of the portion of the building that was still standing. As I did, I saw bunk beds, suitcases, mattresses. I was looking into living rooms - looking into lives. Turning 180 degrees had me facing the Atlantic Ocean. Although I could still hear the sounds of jackhammers and heavy equipment, my eyes were filled with the beautiful sights of gentle waves and blue sky. This reminded me somehow through all of this, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, would guard the hearts and minds of people who are here.

The final part of my route took me to the Delta side where rehab was set up for the rescue crews. It was here where they would wait for their assignment. It was here that they would rest after having worked their shift.

At each point of my circle route I would pray - for peace, for safety, for comfort. I'm grateful to know that many of you were praying as well.



Mobilize Chaplains

My response to Surfside was to support the work of the Miami-Dade Fire Rescue chaplains. It quickly became clear that this would be a long term operation and that more than my help would be needed.

I was able to reach out to my contacts and enlist the help of other fire chaplains from around the state. To date, 14 fire chaplains have committed to doing their

part to provide assistance.



A Powerful Moment

The worksite came to a stop Thursday night at about 10 PM. Crews reached the body of the daughter of a City of Miami fire fighter. The holy hush was a reminder that there were not over 150 “people” who died, but rather husbands, wives, sons, daughters, parents, grandparents, friends.

“The Lord is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those who are crushed in spirit.” Psalms 34:18



Simple Things

As the week continued on, I found myself being incredibly grateful for some of the simple things of life like hot showers, food and coffee.



Large Scale Response

This large scale event demanded a large scale response. Beyond search and rescue crews there were many others that were part of the overall recovery effort.

There were multiple groups taking care of meals. I came across Mercy Chefs who were feeding both the body and soul!

Communication was vital, so Verizon sent their COW (celltower on wheels) as one more layer of support for this operation.

There were also many K9 on scene including search, cadaver, and comfort dogs.



Memorial Wall

From the Miami Herald...

Another person praying at the site was Joe LaCognata, chaplain for the firefighters of Florida Task Force 8 from the Ocala and Gainesville area. The team, which arrived last Sunday, hung a shirt they all signed on the fence, and it's now there among the various photos, prayers, biblical passages and

messages of hope placed at the site since the building collapsed June 24.

“This is overwhelming for all of us. We came here to do one small part. The number of people who are here supporting, and helping and giving, it’s amazing. I’ve never been part of something like this. It is amazing to see what takes place, but, I get to go home to my family again,” LaCognata said.

LaCognata is not a firefighter. His job is to pray and look out for the well being of the men and women who’ve been searching on top of the rubble for the past week looking for survivors and the dead.

“They’re doing all right. They know what their mission was, and they stayed focused,” he said. “They keep on task.”



Stress Management Information

The experience at Surfside may be just one more of life's challenging events that you are experiencing. Click on the image for some information that may help.



So What Do You Do?

I'm often asked to explain my work as a chaplain. The chaplaincy is a ministry of presence. That is, by just being there, I believe God comes a little closer; closer to our pain - closer to our hurt. My work is done quietly in the background. One of the task force members said, "I may never talk to you, but just knowing you're there is helpful to me."

I also believe the presence of a chaplain is permission giving, especially to people of faith. When a chaplain is around, people are reminded of and challenged to live out their own faith.



Final Thoughts

An event such as the Surfside condo collapse certainly causes one to stop and ponder the important questions of life.

What really matters?
Is this life all there is?

I'm reminded of the scripture that formed the basis for The Byrds' 1965 hit song, "Turn, Turn, Turn." Ecclesiastes Chapter 3 begins, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die."

The Bible is full of reminders about the reality of death. Psalm 39:4 sums things up rather well: "Show me, Lord, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is."

Fleeting. Short-lived. Temporary. Brief. Passing. So how do we approach life when it seems like death is always staring us in the face?

If you are wise, you will take stock of the fleeting nature of your life and choose to live this day differently. Psalm 90:12 says, "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." Death can challenge you to fully live the life you've been given.

As you think about the way you'll live today, you also need to think about forever - to think about life after death. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says "God has placed eternity in the human heart." That is, we are hardwired to think about forever. Even on our best days, we are drawn to consider that there must be more. Consider these words from Ecclesiastes 7:2-4...

"Better to spend your time at funerals than at parties. After all, everyone dies—so the living should take this to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for sadness has a refining influence on us. A wise person thinks a lot about death, while a fool thinks only about having a good time."

God sent His Son Jesus Christ to forgive us of our sin and allow us to receive the gift of eternal life. It's in our relationship with Him that we will find strength for today and hope for tomorrow.



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