



**Date of occurrence: June 24, 2021**

**Employee Name: Kemuel Gambirazio, Ariol Lage, Craig Lovellette, Joseph Matthews**

**Classification: Police Officer**

**Unit/Division: Patrol**

**Award/Commendation type and recommendations: Officer of the Year 2021**

**Narrative:**

The Surfside Police Department has selected Officer Kemuel Gambirazio, Officer Ariol Lage, Officer Craig Lovellette and Officer Joseph Matthews as the Surfside Police Department's Officers of the Year for 2021. Officers Gambirazio, Lage, Lovellette and Matthews were the first responding officers to an unforeseen and horrific incident. The Champlain Towers South collapse catastrophe impacted many families, the entire Town of Surfside, surrounding communities and Miami-Dade County, in unimaginable ways. The employees were called upon to serve their community in an unthinkable situation and redefined to protect and serve.

On Thursday, June 24, 2021, Police Officers responded to 8777 Collins Avenue in reference to a general fire alarm at the Champlain Towers South condominium. Upon arrival, Officers Gambirazio, Lage and Lovellette encountered what seemed like smoke filled air, but no smell of burning or flames were observed. They quickly discovered a surreal and unbelievable sight. The Champlain Towers South Condominium had partially collapsed. Officers heard screams for help, but could barely see through the dust filled air making it difficult to even breathe. Despite the treacherous conditions these first responding officers entered a very dangerous zone without hesitation to assist anyone they could. Their bravery and selflessness are admirable.

Acting Sergeant Lovellette assumed command on this tragic early morning call, rapidly calling for additional resources. Officers Gambirazio and Lage coordinated with the first responding units of the Miami-Dade Fire Department and police units from neighboring jurisdictions securing a hot zone perimeter and hurriedly evacuated the nearby buildings. This action prevented further disaster in what potentially could have been an additional collapse of the remaining portion of the condominium.

Captain John Healy arrived immediately establishing command and control, ensured our officers safety while quickly assessing the situation and determining the next operational needs. The Town of Surfside Community Center was designated as the staging location for survivors and other evacuees to gather safely and arranged for the facility to be opened. The first responding officers directed the many dazed and confused citizens to safety.

Officer Joseph Matthews was assigned to Communications when the first calls for help in this incident were received. As the telephone lines rang nonstop and the police radio transmissions described the severity of this disaster, Officer Matthews' calm and professional manner was vital in helping desperate loved ones and citizens asking questions, while at the same time he was relaying critical information to officers on the scene and coordinating additional personnel response.

In the aftermath of the building collapse, the search and rescue mission was extensive requiring additional personnel to secure the perimeter; providing security at the Family Reunification Center; ensure pedestrian safety; and manage traffic control throughout the Town of Surfside. Officers Gambirazio, Lage, Lovellette and Matthews continued to work tirelessly providing this essential support performing exceptionally in extreme heat and inclement weather.

The years of experience of these officers range from three years to 17 years and their poise, courage and compassion was exhibited in response to the worst tragedy ever suffered by the Town of Surfside. These exceptional individuals demonstrated the highest standards of conduct and professionalism as they proudly served their community while embodying the Surfside Police Department's core values. They also received the highest honor of being recognized for their heroism by President Joe Biden during his visit to the Town. Congratulations to Officers Kemuel Gambirazio, Ariol Lage, Craig Lovellette and Joseph Matthews as the recipients of the 2021 Officer of the Year Award!

**Chief of Police:** Rogelio J. Torres Jr.

**Date:** January 31, 2022