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## **South Florida Firms Join Forces For Condo Collapse Class Action, Attracting Potential Class Members**

*By Melea VanOstrand*

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"I spoke to a client that wants people to go to prison, to be honest with you," one South Florida litigator said.



Javier Lopez, partner at Kozyak, Tropin & Thorckmorton.

Within days of filing the first lawsuit over the partial collapse of Champlain Towers South in Surfside, plaintiffs attorney Brad Sohn of The Brad Sohn Law Firm in Coral Gables has partnered with a larger firm specializing in complex commercial litigation.

Sohn will handle the case with Kozyak, Tropin & Throckmorton, based in Miami and Coral Gables.

The proposed class action accuses the Champlain Towers South Condominium Association of negligence. Since it landed in Miami-Dade Circuit Court Thursday, Sohn said he's lined up more than 20 clients and is in talks with more.

### **Not about 'getting their names out there'**

"We're here to listen, we want to know how we can help you," Sohn said. "We want to know how we can help you like lawyers, but also as members of the community."

As of Tuesday afternoon, the death toll was 11 with 150 more people still unaccounted for. Approximately 55 of the building's 136 units collapsed, leaving more than 30 feet of rubble.

Javier "Javy" Lopez is Kozyak's managing partner and co-chair of complex and commercial litigation, and has years of experience handling some of the firm's biggest and most complex cases.

“We’re just starting to learn the identities of the victims. It’s going to be a very slow process,” Lopez said. “I’m happy to see how much help we’ve gotten on a nationwide basis but also on an international basis. The team from Mexico, the team from Israel that has come, and we’ve got the best of the best of the best working on that 24 hours a day. Right now, the focus is on hopefully finding some more victims.”

Sohn and Lopez said the lawsuit isn’t about “getting their names out there,” but is instead about doing something for the community they’re a part of.

“Javy really understands empathy and understands how to listen to people,” Sohn said. “Obviously, there’s an overwhelming component of this that’s just lawyering based and needing to be good lawyers, but part of that, and part of everything, is being a good fellow citizen and I can’t say enough how proud I am to have Javy as a friend as well as a partner.”

Getting the right team of lawyers together who understand the legal issues and have the capacity to try a case of this magnitude is crucial, according to Lopez.

“There’s going to be a lot of man and woman power to litigate this case,” Lopez said. “That’s another reason why we joined forces.”

### **‘Humongous mistakes’**

Sohn argues there’s no question that what happened in the early morning hours of June 24 was preventable.

Both attorneys said they're hoping the lawsuit will bring a thorough investigation so that clients can focus on healing.

"We've actually already served a bunch of discovery requests and at least one subpoena, if not more, and it's the beginning of the discovery process that will, of course, be lengthy and probably take us down roads of bringing in additional parties and things like that, but it's the necessary first step," Sohn said.

The putative class members are seeking at least \$5 million in damages, excluding costs and attorney fees, for everyone affected, but their attorneys say it's not just about the money. They want more accountability, answers and a transparent and immediate fact-finding process.

"I spoke to a client that wants people to go to prison, to be honest with you. We're obviously in civil court, but who knows how these facts are going to play out if you talk about a complete reckless disregard for human life? Somebody, or a big group of people, made humongous mistakes. Buildings don't just fall and, based on what we're seeing and what we're learning, this is not something that just happened overnight," said Lopez.

He argues a series of alarm bells preceded the catastrophe.

"You don't put off life safety issues," Lopez said. "You can put off painting a wall, or cosmetic stuff, but when the alarm is rung on life safety, you work on that immediately. That's not optional."

## **'Breathtakingly sad'**

Both Sohn and Lopez are experienced litigators, but both said there's no real comparison for a case like this.

"There are experiences that all of us have that help us, but I certainly have never felt pain from clients and victims and people who've lost their homes quite in the way I have here," Sohn said. "I'm not sure if it's because it's in our own community or it just harmed so many so immediately, but it's just breathtakingly sad."

Nearly a dozen bodies have been found, and rescue teams are searching the site every day in 12-hour shifts, according to Miami Mayor Francis Suarez.