

Florida Healthy Start marks 30 years of helping at-risk mothers and babies at Wellington event

Since 1991, Florida Healthy Start has helped the state lower its infant mortality rate by 32 percent through a system of care for women and children.

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WELLINGTON — Maria Andrea Quiroz Zuleta says she always wanted to be a mother, without realizing how big a village it would take to raise a child.

She didn't realize that the same village she connected with through Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies also was essential for her to get through both of her pregnancies and postpartum recovery.

On Tuesday morning, surrounded by members of that village at HomeSafe's western campus, Quiroz Zuleta spoke about the support that she has received

from the Florida Healthy Start program, its local partner organizations and other mothers for the past eight years, even during a pandemic.

Florida's infant mortality rate down 32% since 1991

Since 1991, Florida Healthy Start has contributed to the state's 32% drop in its infant mortality rate — which measures the number of infant deaths per 1,000 live births — through an integrated system of care designed to address issues that may occur in pregnancy and infancy as early as possible.

Through the program's universal screenings, health care providers are able to indicate risk factors for poor birth and developmental outcomes, as well as connect postpartum women, children, and families to a range of services.

Having experienced a miscarriage, Quiroz Zuleta said her most recent pregnancy , brought concerns and anxiety. But even with changes in procedures, and services moving online because of COVID-19, she says the program's continuous support helped her have a successful pregnancy. Her son Leonardo is now 4 months old.

"Knowing that I was not alone was key to feeling good during these tough times," she said. "Not only because pregnancy itself brings us so many questions and vulnerability, but also during uncertain times throughout the pandemic."



Program a priority for Gov. Lawton Chiles, First Lady Rhea Chiles

From the beginning of pregnancy to the time a child turns 3, Healthy Start teaches families to advocate for their own physical and mental health, especially for those who face systemic barriers — poverty, racism, homelessness and more — that limit access to proper health care.

Cathy Timuta, Healthy Start's chief executive officer, says legislation pushed by the late Gov. Lawton Chiles and First Lady Rhea Chiles helped break down some of those barriers and set up the nonprofit whose universal screening service is unique to Florida.

Before creating Healthy Start, Lawton Chiles was the chair of the National Commission to Prevent Infant Mortality, and spent time trying to focus the country's attention on the importance of prenatal care.

Under state statute, health care providers must offer the state prenatal risk screening to all those expecting at their first or second prenatal visit, as well as the state infant postnatal risk screening to guardians of all infants born in Florida before they leave the hospital.

Once the voluntary screening is completed, the Healthy Start program connects women to several community resources that provide counseling and hand-on classes. Among them are:

- Home visits.
- Prenatal education and support.
- Free screening and services.
- Parenting education and support.
- Education and support.
- Care coordination.
- Health and well-being.



Program also targets children's critical early years

HomeSafe, a nonprofit that helps victims of child abuse, recently opened a campus near Wellington, where several partners of the Healthy Start Coalition of Palm Beach County celebrated the program's 30th anniversary.

Delores Haynes says most families served by Healthy Start are grateful to have a successful pregnancy and often believe that further services are not essential. But the Children's Service Council program officer made clear that services to families are important beyond birth.

The Healthy Start Healthy Beginnings Coalition of Palm Beach County offers support for children with developmental or behavioral difficulties as they prepare to enter formal school settings, such as kindergarten.

She also pointed out that in working with one program to address an issue, recipients are often linked to several others without realizing it.

"When our families enter our system of care, we want it to feel seamless — feel as if they are working with one provider — when in fact, they may be working with three or four," Haynes said.



HomeSafe's CEO Matthew Ladika says his nonprofit works with Healthy Start to screen children in Palm Beach County from birth to age 5.

Parents are encouraged to engage with their children from an early age to assist with development. but if a child's development becomes a concern, Ladika says HomeSafe's staff can monitor and work with children to reach their next milestone.

"Kids are still growing, even beyond that," Ladika said. "Even up to 18, their brains are still developing. But from birth to age 3 is very critical."

Quiroz Zuleta became a part of Healthy Start's system of care through the Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Coalition, which helps women receive prenatal care. It helped her connect with other women as a member of Centering Pregnancy, a prenatal care support group.

Healthy Start coalitions, Haynes says, also prioritizes helping women whose chances of giving birth to a healthy baby are hampered due to several risk factors, such as:

- Poverty.
- Limited access to health care.
- Poor nutrition.
- Age.
- Substance abuse.
- Homelessness.
- Domestic violence.

Historically, racial disparities have been another risk factor, contributing to high infant mortality rates.

In 1991, the infant mortality rate in the county was at 8.9 deaths per 1,000 live births, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. By 1992, with 8.5 deaths for every 1,000 live births, it had decreased by 4.5%.

As of 2020, with 3.8 deaths for every 1,000 live births, Palm Beach County's infant mortality rate is one of the lowest in the state. The infant mortality rate, though, is 2.3 times higher for Black babies than white ones, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

"We know that we will once again be one of the lowest rates in the nation, but that does not stop the work that we are doing," Haynes said. "We will continue to address the infant mortality rate. We will continue to ensure that babies are no longer born too small and too soon."



'Pregnant women should never feel alone'

Joanne Newman says she was once one of the nurses screening mothers when the Healthy Start program was first introduced.

Now as director of the Maternal Child Health program in the Florida Department of Health's Palm Beach County office, she works with the coalition by providing the nurses that perform the screenings.

Nurses are accustomed to telling their patients what to do for their health, she said. But she said the program strives to help mothers figure out what help works for them.

For Black mothers, discussing the health care services they need is often vital. The Women's Health Initiative works with Black women in Riviera

Beach, Lake Park and West Palm Beach to ensure that they have the healthiest babies possible.

"We are [working] as advocates, support systems, educators," Newman said

Quiroz Zuleta said through education from Healthy Start organizations, she has been able to connect more with her feelings while experiencing motherhood, postpartum recovery and grief.

"The exhaustion women feel and the things nobody talks about during pregnancy or postpartum are real," she said. "Pregnant women should never feel alone, so it is important to have these programs not only for expecting and postpartum women but also for the whole family."