



A Boost for Sylvester: Governor Announces \$100 Million in Funding for Florida's Top Cancer Centers

The Florida funding will help Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine conduct cutting-edge research and improve the care and treatment of patients.

From “hitting the wall,” that point at which the body’s energy stores are depleted, to losing her toenails, Raquel Kaufler had grown accustomed to the pain and injuries that come with running marathons.



From left: Erin Kobetz, Ph.D., M.P.H., Governor Ron De Santis, and Casey De Santis

She conquered the five boroughs of New York City on three occasions, beat Boston’s venerable road course twice, and traversed the circuits of Miami and Chicago multiple times –



all told, about 300 miles of competitive endurance running.

Then, 10 years ago, Kaufler embarked upon the race of her life. Doctors diagnosed her with Stage 4 clear cell renal cell carcinoma, a type of kidney cancer with a five-year survival rate.

“But it’s been 10, and I’m still fighting,” she said, praising the lifesaving treatment she has received at Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center.

Record Funding for Cancer Research and Care

On Tuesday, she and a group of other cancer survivors, physicians, trustees, legislators, and guests assembled in the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine’s Don Soffer Clinical Research Center for a press conference that heralded a new milestone in the fight against cancer. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis announced the passage of a record \$100 million in funding for research and care at the state’s top three cancer centers, including Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center – which received a prestigious NCI designation from the National Cancer Institute three years ago.

The initiative, part of DeSantis’s 2022-23 budget that was approved by the Florida Legislature, represents a nearly 60 percent increase in state funding for the institutes, which also include the H. Lee Moffitt Cancer Center and Research Institute in Tampa and the UF Health Shands Cancer Hospital in Gainesville.

“We have confidence in these institutions to make good use of that money and do so in a way that will have meaningful impact on the lives of the patients that they will be serving,” said DeSantis, with his wife, Casey DeSantis, standing next to him.



Raquel Kaufler, a Sylvester patient, speaks at press conference.

'Beacon of Hope'

“As the First Lady, Ms. Kaufler, and the Governor have experienced, we continue to make great progress in treating cancer as a result of decades of collaborative research. That’s why the State of Florida funding is so vital to our efforts to cure more patients of cancer and conduct important research to improve the lives of cancer survivors,” said Stephen D. Nimer, M.D., director of the Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center and the Oscar de la Renta Endowed Chair in Cancer Research. “This level of support sends an important message to anyone needing care and researchers who want to make a significant impact. There’s no better place to be, to join our fight against cancer.”

A “beacon of hope” for South Florida is how Erin Kobetz, Ph.D., M.P.H., vice provost for research and scholarship and associate director of population science and cancer disparities at Sylvester, described the \$100 million in



funding. “This allocation provides the opportunity for Sylvester and other centers to pursue truly novel research that might not otherwise be funded. And it’s those cutting-edge ideas that hold the promise of better prevention and cures,” she said.

DeSantis called attention to his own family’s battle with the disease, noting that his mother was diagnosed with cancer when he was in elementary school and that his wife recently defeated breast cancer. “Everyone in Florida is touched by this disease in one way or another,” he said.

Praising her husband for his support throughout her battle with the disease, which included accompanying her to all her chemotherapy appointments, the state’s first lady called the \$100 million in funding a gamechanger. “Florida’s going to lead the way to find a definitive cure once and for all, for all types of cancer,” Casey DeSantis declared.

The Fight Continues

Raymond Rodriguez-Torres, whose daughter, Bella, battled an aggressive form of childhood cancer for six years, said, “Today’s the day Bella smiles from heaven.” He pointed out that the foundation he helped start, Live Like Bella, which assists families impacted by childhood cancer, has raised \$26 million for pediatric cancer research in the state.

As for Kaufler, who was born in Cuba and raised in Miami, her fight against cancer continues. Surgeons had to remove her right kidney, but follow-up scans revealed the cancer had spread to both lungs. Sylvester oncologist Jaime Merchan, M.D., was able to offer her a state-of-the-art targeted immunotherapy with few side effects through a clinical trial



at Sylvester.

Kaufler still receives chemotherapy. And while she can no longer run marathons, she still manages to exercise, running at least five miles a day.

“I was like a machine when I ran marathons. I always kept going,” Kaufler said. “I’ve applied that philosophy to my diagnosis and treatment.”

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