

The Firefighter Cancer Initiative Mobile Clinic Is Ready for the Road

A gleaming, new 32-foot vehicle recently took its place at the center of Hialeah Fire Station #1 for a celebration announcing a program designed to improve health outcomes for firefighters. The ribbon-cutting event marked a milestone in the trajectory of Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center's Firefighter Cancer Initiative (FCI) – the launch of a mobile clinic that takes cancer prevention and early detection on the road to fire departments across South Florida.



Noreen Salah Burpee, executive director of The Salah Foundation, and Ron Mastriana, member of The Salah Foundation Board of Trustees.

Made possible by the support of The Salah Foundation, the state-of-the-art mobile clinic is the culmination of several

years of advocacy, research, and state-wide coalition-building to address the alarming rates of cancer in the firefighter population, and to provide more convenient access to cancer prevention and education resources for first responders.

“It is truly incredible to be here among our first responders, community leaders, and scientists who have partnered to create such an inspirational effort,” said Noreen Salah Burpee, executive director of The Salah Foundation. “Our partnership with Sylvester and this mobile clinic reflects the best of our commitment to strengthen the health of a vulnerable community. Firefighters rush to save our lives; now we are here to support them.”

Firefighters face visible hazards of smoke and flames when answering the call for help, but it is the unseen danger of onsite carcinogens that is causing higher rates of cancer diagnoses and deaths among these heroic first responders.

Two large-scale studies by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health show that firefighters across the United States face a 9% increase in cancer diagnoses, and a 14% increase in cancer-related deaths, compared with the general population. Other studies attribute as many as 61% of firefighter deaths from 2002 to 2017 to cancer. In fact, cancer caused 70% of the line-of-duty deaths for career firefighters in 2016.

Citizen-Scientists



Erin Kobetz, Ph.D., M.P.H., opens the ribbon-cutting celebration.

“Our firefighters act as citizen-scientists – they tell us what questions to ask, how to best ask them and then how to operationalize our findings into solutions such as this vehicle,” said Erin Kobetz, Ph.D., M.P.H., associate director for population science and cancer disparity at Sylvester, and the vice provost for research and scholarship at the University of Miami. “With The Salah Foundation’s support, this vehicle is a dream realized by Hialeah firefighters, and firefighters around the state, who are increasingly at risk for developing and dying of cancer.”

Founded by Kobetz in 2015 and led by a multidisciplinary team of scientists, health care practitioners and occupational health and safety experts, the FCI was launched to address this public health crisis within the firefighter population. Johanna Garibaldi, RN, paramedic and nurse navigator at the Sylvester Cancer Prevention and Wellness Clinic and a key member of the FCI outreach team, shared her excitement, “I have worked alongside firefighters for most of my career – they are family to me. It’s an honor and a privilege to be

able to get them the services they need through the mobile clinic to lead healthy lives.”

The mobile clinic will start in Hialeah, traveling station to station, and ultimately will travel throughout the tri-county area to provide comprehensive health exams, cancer screenings, education, and resources on how to mitigate occupational risks while on the job. It will supplement brick-and-mortar clinics located in downtown Miami, Coral Gables, and Plantation.

“We know our clinics are hard to reach for firefighters who live at a distance and have work shifts that don’t line up with clinic hours,” said Aimee Janelle Green, D.N.P., APRN, a nurse practitioner with the Sylvester Cancer Prevention and Wellness Clinic, who joins Garibaldi as part of the outreach team. “They can’t receive the information and clinical interventions they need. Now we can address this gap with the mobile clinic.”

“Heart and Soul”



Sylvester's Firefighter Cancer Initiative ribbon-cutting event launches the mobile clinic

At the event, the voice of firefighters was represented by Samuel Eaton, retired battalion chief from Palm Beach County Fire Rescue. A passionate advocate for firefighters, with personal connections to many who succumbed to cancer, Eaton is considered the “heart and soul” of the Firefighter Cancer Initiative.

Pointing to a firefighter’s helmet and pack at the podium, Eaton said, “All the signatures on the helmet and memorabilia on the pack represent 1,500 firefighters we have lost to cancer. Today we are honoring those lives, and we are delivering on our promise to get our firefighters the help they need.”

“Sylvester, and our FCI initiative, is committed to addressing health disparities in cancer prevention and treatment,” said Stephen D. Nimer, M.D., director of Sylvester and the Oscar de la Renta Endowed Chair in Cancer Research. “Thanks to the support of The Salah Foundation and the dedication of our researchers and community advocates, we are at the forefront of developing effective methods to reduce the rate of cancer among a beloved and heroic community.”

Funding Sources

The FCI receives annual funding from the State of Florida and UHealth – the University of Miami Health System. The initiative’s multidisciplinary team also includes Alberto Caban-Martinez, Ph.D., D.O., M.P.H., Natasha Schaefer Solle, Ph.D., and Jessica MacIntyre, ARNP, NP-C, AOCNP.

The Salah Foundation is a private foundation that supports non-profit organizations in the United States. The Foundation

aims to strengthen families and communities, and encourage individuals to become productive and responsible citizens. They have a special interest in education, medical research, community development, and self-sufficiency programs aimed at the economically disadvantaged, the young, the elderly, and the disabled. The Salah Foundation accepts grants by invitation only, and does not accept unsolicited grant proposals.

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