

Miami Herald

Manny Fermin, 'dynamo' CEO of Healthy Start Coalition of Miami-Dade, dies at 56

BY HOWARD COHEN

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Manny Fermin was the first, and only, chief executive officer of the Healthy Start Coalition of Miami-Dade since April 2001. He died on March 17, 2022.

Miami-Dade has lost one of its most devoted advocates for children and expectant mothers.

Manuel Enrique Fermin, the first, and only, chief executive of the Healthy Start Coalition of Miami-Dade, died at age 56 of pancreatic cancer on March 17 in Miami, according to his family and colleagues.

Fermin, a father of four with his wife Sandy — first came two sons and then two daughters, ranging in age from 10 to 17 — began serving the coalition in April 2001, and he remained in his leadership role until his death.

Healthy Start Coalition of Miami-Dade is a community-based nonprofit organization funded by the Florida Department of Health and the Agency for Health Care Administration to serve as the county's prenatal and infant care coalition.

"If Lawton Chiles were still here — the governor with the great vision that has made such a difference in infant and maternal health in Florida — he would be telling us that Manny has been a great servant leader," said David Lawrence Jr., chair of The Children's Movement of Florida and a former publisher of the Miami Herald.

"I am so proud of Manny's leadership. A real difference-maker," he said.



‘DYNAMO OF ENERGY AND ENTHUSIASM’

“Manny Fermin was a dynamo of energy and enthusiasm for the well-being of healthy moms and babies. His powerful and persuasive voice for wise investments in the earliest stages of life was truly inspirational,” said Jack Levine, founder of 4Generations Institute in Tallahassee.

“Manny’s leadership was a beacon attracting so many investors in prevention. Governors, legislators, philanthropists and a diverse spectrum of health professionals all made wiser decisions when they listened to Manny’s counsel,” Levine, a child and family advocate for more than 40 years, said, adding, “The club of people who did not respect Manny’s ardent advocacy had no members.”

During Fermin’s tenure leading Healthy Start he helped launch the Jasmine Project in 2010, a community-based collaboration of organizations, based at University of Miami, dedicated to the health of pregnant women and infants in Miami Gardens, Opa-locka and North Miami.

The project’s focus was geared toward reducing racial disparities in Black infant mortality and health outcomes in Miami-Dade County.

“We are 100% committed to do whatever it takes to save our babies, all of our babies,” Fermin told the Miami Herald at the time. “The Healthy Start family has experienced a deep and significant loss with the passing of Manny Fermin — a passionate advocate,” Monica Figueroa King, chief executive officer of the Broward Healthy Start Coalition, said in an email to the Herald.

More recently, the threat to pregnant women from Zika, the mosquito-borne virus that has been linked to microcephaly, a serious birth defect, led Fermin to ensure Healthy Start’s services in case management for all women tested for Zika in Miami-Dade County in 2017.

“Zika is the most high-profile risk we face today,” Fermin wrote in a column for the Herald in 2017. “We are doing everything we can to make sure that women are receiving the education and resources they need to protect themselves.”



Manual “Manny” Fermin, CEO of the Healthy Start Coalition in a 2017 file photo. At the time, he wrote an editorial for the Miami Herald stressing the need to be vigilant against the Zika virus. “We need to do everything we can to help the most at-risk of our community get a healthy start,” he wrote at the time. Miami Herald file

Then another high-profile risk happened in the community. Happened worldwide.

COVID-19

Fermin put Healthy Start into action at the start of the coronavirus pandemic, too.

“Just imagine for a moment being a woman who is pregnant right now. What should be one of the happiest events of your life is suddenly clouded with stress, fear and uncertainty,” Fermin wrote in another column for the Herald, in May 2020 — about two months after COVID-19 first led to lockdowns, soaring cases and deaths.

“Miami-Dade’s Healthy Start program is adapting to address the maternal health needs of Florida’s most populous and culturally diverse community,” Fermin wrote. “Our dedicated teams of case workers and therapists are connecting with moms and new families using consistent outreach and telehealth to provide education, address physical needs, and offer psycho-social counseling.”

EDUCATION

Born in Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic on March 14, 1966, Fermin moved with his family to New York in 1971 and then to Miami in 1979 where he went to Miami Southridge Senior High School. He earned his bachelor of arts degree in sociology from the University of Florida in 1988. In 1990, he earned his master's in public administration and his graduate certificate in public management from Florida International University.

Before joining Healthy Start, Fermin was the executive director of the Miami-Dade Area Health Education Center from 1995 to 2001.

“Manny Fermin’s passing is a tremendous loss to me, to his family and to the entire community,” said Paul C. Hunt, president of the board of directors of Healthy Start Coalition of Miami-Dade. “He spent more than 20 tireless years ensuring that the infants, mothers and families were provided the resources to have the happiest and healthiest lives possible. A very unique person who will be long remembered for his incredible contributions.”



Healthy Start Coalition of Miami-Dade
about 9 months ago

Celebrating
20
years
2001-2021

Healthy Start Coalition of Miami-Dade

🎉 In honor of #HSCMD turning 20 years old this year, we want to reiterate our strong vision of ensuring that all children in Miami-Dade County get a Healthy Start at life!

🌟 Thank you to all our community partners, organizations, and families that have contributed to our success over the years. Under the leadership of founding CEO Manuel (Manny) Fermin, we have been able to improve the lives of many mothers, babies, and families in our community.

👏 We look forward to continu... See more

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SURVIVORS, SERVICES

Fermin's survivors include his wife Sandy Fermin; children Aiden, Gavin, Julia and Lilly; his parents Evangelina and Manuel Fermin; and his sisters Sandra and Ivonne.

A memorial will be held at 7 p.m. Friday, April 1, at Central Presbyterian Church, 12455 SW 104th St., Miami. In lieu of flowers, the family has set up a GoFundMe page to help with the cost of medical and living expenses.

Read more at: <https://www.miamiherald.com/article259661995.html#storylink=cpy>

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Miami Herald Real Time/Breaking News reporter Howard Cohen, a 2017 Media Excellence Awards winner, has covered pop music, theater, health and fitness, obituaries, municipal government and general assignment. He started his career in the Features department at the Miami Herald in 1991.