

Broward County Mayor Mark Bogen has a passion project: Broward became the first county in the country to offer a free cardiac CT scan as a preventive measure to people who showed no signs that heart failure is imminent or even a concern.

(Amy Beth Bennett/South Florida Sun Sentinel)

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Broward's new mayor has a passion project, and he takes it very personally.

He should. Two decades ago, Mark Bogen's mother died suddenly of a heart attack. There were no symptoms, no ignored warning signs. One day she seemed healthy, and the next she was gone. Bogen's usually animated voice slowed considerably as he recalled her loss in a recent interview. If only there had been some way to diagnose the danger ahead of time, he thought.

He later learned there was such a test. He took it. It saved his life. The only problem was, by the time most people learn it exists, it's too late. That became something Bogen was determined to change.

[At Bogen's urging](#), Broward became the first county in the country to offer a free cardiac CT scan as a preventive measure to people who showed no signs that heart failure is imminent or even a concern. Bogen recruited Dr. Claudio Smuclovisky, the radiologist director of South Florida Medical Imaging who worked at Holy Cross Hospital in Fort Lauderdale. Smuclovisky said he was impressed with Bogen's determination and agreed to develop the Broward Heart Project.

"What's shocking is we're not screening these people" outside of this program, Smuclovisky said. "That's what's wrong with the system. We set out to change the world to prevent the most common cause of death, which is heart disease."

The pilot program started in the summer of 2023 and finished up on Sept. 30. On his election as mayor on Nov. 18, Bogen shared the results of the program and announced that it will resume on Dec. 10, spearheaded by the Cleveland Clinic and funded in part by the Florida Panthers Foundation.

"The Broward Heart Project tested 7,000 people who had no symptoms," Bogen said. "Of that number, more than 4,000 needed help ranging from medication to stents to open heart

surgery. An additional 350 had other medical issues brought to their attention as a result of that scan. This test is a lifesaver.”

The test was available to anyone between 45 and 70 with at least one qualifying condition: high cholesterol, high blood pressure, diabetes, a history of smoking or a family history of heart disease. Future requirements will be announced at a later date. Chest pains and other symptoms are not required to justify the test, which combines a traditional CT scan with an injection of iodine to more vividly display the kinds of blockages that lead to heart attacks.

[Bogen took it himself four years ago](#). The result: He learned he had a 70% blockage in his left anterior descending artery. It's the largest artery in the circulatory system, and when it's blocked, it triggers a heart attack ominously referred to as a “widowmaker,” with a 12% survival rate according to the Cleveland Clinic. Major medication saved Bogen's life.

Bogen also convinced his friend, former Los Angeles Dodger Steve Sax, to take the test earlier this year. Sax is not a Broward resident, so the test was privately funded, but the results were compelling.

“I believed I did not need the test,” Sax told the Broward County Commission on Nov. 18. As a professional baseball player and five-time all star, Sax said he prided himself on maintaining his health and physical shape. The test raised the most serious alarm of Sax's life.

“I learned that I was 95 to 99 percent blocked in four major arteries,” he said. “Five months ago I had open heart surgery. I was told that if I hadn't gotten the test I would probably have had a major heart attack soon. Thank you for saving my life.”

Over the course of the pilot project, the tests were offered at Broward Health, Holy Cross Hospital, Baptist Health and the Cleveland Clinic. Moving forward, the Cleveland Clinic will take the lead in offering the screenings. The Viola family, owners of the Florida Panthers, pledged \$1 million to fund the Broward Heart Project for another five years.

As for the science behind the project and the future of insurance and federal funding, Smuclovsky said the journey is still in its first steps.

“Cardiac screening is currently only approved in insurance for people who are symptomatic,” he said. “This can save lives, and we can try to use this information to move the needle at the congressional level. This caught the eyeballs of a lot of people around the country. This is going to be huge.

Eligibility requirements for the revived program providing free heart tests to Broward County residents will be announced soon. During the interim, residents can

email HeartProject@Broward.org to be contacted via email as soon as application for the program is available. For further information, contact Broward Mayor Mark Bogen's office at 954-357-7002. The project's website is takehearttest.com.