
Blue Zones Project Background

Blue Zones Project® is a community-by-community well-being improvement initiative designed to help people lead longer, better lives by making healthy choices easier. The initiative promotes simple permanent or semi-permanent improvements to community, organization and home environments that support healthy lifestyle behaviors and habits based on blue zones regions.

Blue Zones Project is based on research by Dan Buettner, a National Geographic Fellow and New York Times best-selling author who identified five extraordinary populations of the world—or blue zones areas—with the highest concentration of people living to 100 years or older. They include the longevity hotspots of Loma Linda, California; Nicoya, Costa Rica; Sardinia, Italy; Ikaria, Greece; and Okinawa, Japan.

Blue Zones Project incorporates Buettner’s findings and works with cities, organizations and individuals to implement policies and programs that move a community toward better health and well-being. The first test city, Albert Lea, Minnesota was once well below both the national and Minnesota standard for health indicators, ranking 68th out of 87 Minnesota counties. But Albert Lea was able to turn around both its flailing economy and the poor health of its residents and earn a spot on Realtor.com’s list for the Top 10 Affordable Small Towns Where You’d Actually Want to Live¹. By the end of the pilot project, adopting the Blue Zone® model made significant differences in Albert Lea such as a 90% increase in community satisfaction, 40% drop in city worker healthcare costs, 25% increase in property values, 40% increase in biking and walking², 3 additional quality years added to the participants’ life expectancy³ and movement up from #68 to #34 in Minnesota County Health Rankings⁴.

Today, Blue Zones Project partners with communities to develop public-private partnerships and create sustainable improvements to environment, policy, and social networks. Currently, 50 communities across North America have joined Blue Zones Project, impacting more than 3 million individuals. The movement includes two Health Districts in California; 15 cities in Iowa; Albert Lea, Minnesota; Fort Worth, Texas; Corry, Pennsylvania; Brevard, North Carolina; Airdrie, Alberta; and multiple communities in regional projects across Southwest Florida, Hawaii, Oklahoma, Oregon, Wisconsin, and Illinois. As Blue Zones Project positively impacts local and regional health trends through its innovative approach to improve population health, more communities with leaders committed to well-being transformation are coming forward requesting to be part of this growing movement.

When applying to become part of Blue Zones Project, community leaders and residents identify local strengths and opportunities, and outline community efforts that might support the initiative. Once a city is selected, a local team is hired to work with local Steering and Leadership Committees within the community to develop and adopt a custom Blue Zones Project Blueprint, which is a detailed master implementation plan for the Project, with goals, strategies, and metrics to guide the community transformation over the coming years.

Aligned and guided by the Blueprint, Blue Zones Project then delivers best practices and strategies for making healthy choices easier through sustainable change in worksites, schools, faith-based organizations, restaurants, grocery stores and community policy. Blue Zones Project gives people choices on how to make small, simple changes to their daily routines to adopt healthier choices where they live, work, and play. Buettner identified these best practices as the Power 9® principles—nine habits of the world’s longest living people. From moving naturally to waking up each day with purpose, the Power 9 support well-being and longevity.

Once a city meets its predetermined goals measured through a combination of the Community Well-Being Index and community-reported metrics, it is certified as a Blue Zones Community®. Communities celebrate this milestone promoting their community as a place that values the health and well-being of its residents - adding fuel to economic development by attracting grants and driving business growth in their area. For more information on Blue Zones Project and how it is inspiring better well-being in communities across the nation, visit bluezonesproject.com.

VALUE SUMMARY

In 2009, research in the Journal of American Medicine indicated that less than 8 percent of the U.S. population adhere to five core healthy habits—not smoking, eating healthfully, maintaining regular physical activity, avoiding increased use of alcohol, and maintaining a healthy weight—down from 15 percent only 20 years previous. Today, indicators point to that number being halved again—meaning, less than 4 percent of the U.S. population today achieves consistency in adhering to healthy habits. Lifestyle risks and the burden of chronic disease continue to increase dramatically, causing unsustainable growth in medical costs, lost productivity, and even regional economic decline.

It is well established that the underlying causes of these trends are our environments—the people, places, and policies we are exposed to every day. These factors influence how we make thousands of decisions every day—many unconsciously—that form our habits. Therein lies the unique opportunity to do something different in order to impact an entire community: change the environments where people spend time.

Blue Zones Project® is a proven approach based on that premise. Nearly 15 years of research has shown that by applying the cultural and environmental practices of the world’s longest-lived people, we can quickly and dramatically change a community’s future course to one of improved health and economic vitality. By adopting certain systemic changes, whole communities have been able to re-engineer environments and culture to make the healthy choice the easy choice.

We know that sustainably increasing a population’s well-being just one point (on one-hundred-point scale) from its current baseline leads to a 1% decrease in total healthcare costs, 2% reduction in hospital admissions, and 0.6% reduction in lost workforce productivity.

For Health Systems, Insurers, Community Hospitals, Health Districts and Foundations, implementing Blue Zones Project creates medical-cost savings, improved productivity, regional economic impact, media value, and related follow-on community grants.