

NCH Healthcare | Naples, Florida

NCH Healthcare and community partners in Southwest Florida launched the Blue Zones Project, a well-being improvement initiative focused on making healthy choices the easier options for everyone in the community. By partnering with regional employers, schools, restaurants, grocery stores and local organizations, NCH worked to extend the benefits of its successful employee health care program across the entire region. The Blue Zones agenda focused on pursuing healthy policy solutions, promoting the health effects of belonging and offering “purpose” workshops. As a result, the community has tracked positive health improvements, and the greater Naples area has achieved the number one well-being ranking in the U.S. for the past four consecutive years (2015–2018).

Overview

NCH Healthcare is a self-insured, two-hospital system based in Naples, Florida, that is also in alliance with more than 700 independent physicians and medical facilities in dozens of locations throughout Southwest Florida. The system is recognized as a prevention role model in the community.

Its employee health program, for example, uses behavioral economic principles to incentivize employees to make healthy choices. Employees receive a 10% discount on their insurance premiums for getting preventive screenings (e.g., mammograms and colonoscopies), completing health risk assessments, and not smoking. Results have been



remarkable: Since 2009, the program has reduced NCH’s insurance costs by 54%; between 2015 and 2016, 34% of employees lost excess weight and 37.4% improved A1c readings.

When local government offices heard about NCH Healthcare’s employee health program outcomes, they adopted the health system’s preventive approaches — and saw similar results. These successes inspired community leaders to start

thinking bigger. NCH and public officials together wanted to help residents across the entire community reap the benefits of disease prevention, including a lower incidence of illness and the associated treatment costs. Unsure of how to tackle a public health challenge so big, leaders conducted extensive research to identify best practices in community health approaches.

To sustain and build upon its successes, NCH Healthcare and its partners decided to sponsor a Blue Zones Project.

Approach

The term Blue Zones refers to longevity hot spots, including Ikaria, Greece, and Loma Linda, California, that were identified by National Geographic Fellow Dan Buettner. After visiting these communities, Buettner and other researchers pinpointed lifestyle behaviors, known as the “Power 9 principles,” that contribute to a long life and a sense of well-being. These behaviors include regular physical activity, relaxation, moderate wine consumption, having a plant-based diet and eating smaller meals, in addition to prioritizing family, participating in social circles, practicing religion or spirituality, and knowing one’s purpose in life.

As one of 50 Blue Zones communities across the country, the Southwest Florida project engages various sectors, including worksites, grocery stores and homeowner

associations, to adopt best practices related to these nine principles.

A major tenet of Blue Zones is to nudge people to make healthier choices by engineering the choice into their daily lives or by making the choice easy or fun. For example, as one of the worksites involved, NCH Healthcare has created walking routes around its hospital campuses, launched employee challenges (e.g., to increase produce intake) and removed sugar-sweetened beverages from cafeterias and vending machines. In another example, schools are organizing “walking buses” to ensure children get needed exercise. Rather than drive their children to school, parents drop them off at a community location and all the children walk together to school under the supervision of adult volunteers.

The Blue Zones infrastructure helps deploy a coordinated approach across the community. A volunteer steering committee of 17 community leaders, as well as a staff of nine, oversees the entire initiative. In addition, each sector has an oversight committee. Members of the restaurant sector committee, for example, meet with local restaurant owners to highlight how the initiative can benefit them,

such as by attracting additional patrons; then restaurants pick specific Blue Zones practices to implement, such as offering fresh fruit as a dessert option or using smaller plates to discourage overeating.

Interventions

Three specific ways that the Southwest Florida project is rolling out its broad agenda include:

Pursuing healthy policy solutions.

At a local government level, Blue Zones is pursuing a Complete Streets policy to ensure safe routes for pedestrians and cyclists. National experts on urban planning and built environment are working with local community planners to help educate residents and government officials about the benefits of such a policy.

The Southwest Florida project is also working with local faith-based organizations, worksites and other sectors to encourage them to adopt healthy policies or rules. Tobacco policies also are being pursued, such as designating parks and beaches as no-smoking areas and increasing the legal smoking age from 18 to 21.

Promoting the health effects of belonging.

The effect of loneliness and social isolation on lifespan is comparable to that of regular smoking or obesity. To help residents gain the benefits of social connections, the Blue Zones Project in Southwest Florida is encouraging the formation of moais (pronounced “mow-eyes”). Derived from a Japanese social custom, a moai is a small group of people who get together regularly to connect and support one another in a positive way. Worksites, homeowner associations and other sectors are sponsoring moais that focus on specific healthy activities, such as plant-based potlucks and walking.

Lessons Learned

- **Preventive health care is responsible health care.** By moving from a model that focuses on treating disease to one that prioritizes and promotes wellness, health outcomes and total costs significantly improved.
- **The Blue Zones Project’s success lies in its all-inclusive, comprehensive approach that considers residents’ inner lives as well as how to make healthier choices easier.** Feedback from residents has been overwhelmingly positive, and many are rallying around the communitywide goal of improving overall health and well-being.
- **It takes time to see significant results.** NCH Healthcare is funding the Blue Zones Project period for eight years. Similar community health projects are typically funded for only three to five years, which does not always allow enough time to create lasting change.



Purpose workshops. Among the most popular Blue Zones events in Southwest Florida are its two-hour purpose workshops. These interactive classes help participants rediscover their talents, passions and purpose. Sector teams partner with worksites, homeowner associations and other sectors to offer these workshops to their members or employees. Classes are also offered to the general public. As a result of these workshops, some residents have formed purpose-related moais, meeting regularly to share a passion, such as volunteering at the botanical garden.

Impact

The Blue Zones Project–Southwest Florida measures its success via the Gallup–Sharecare Well-Being Index, which is a survey of area residents. When comparing 2015 and 2017 index results, numerous positive improvements were identified:

- **Overall well-being scores improved by 0.6%.**
- **High cholesterol decreased by 2.5%.**
- **High blood pressure decreased by 1.5%.**
- **Obesity declined by 0.7%.**
- **Smoking tobacco declined by 0.5%.**

Next Steps

The Blue Zones Project–Southwest Florida is up and running across seven ZIP codes around Naples, as well as the villages of Estero and Bonita Springs. Over the next few years, the initiative will be rolled out to other nearby communities. Eventually, the NCH Healthcare president and CEO would like to see the entire state of Florida embrace the Blue Zones model.

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