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.

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.

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.

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.
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.

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.

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.

Contacts
**Allen Weiss, M.D.**
Chief Medical Officer
Blue Zones Project – National
Allen.Weiss@sharecare.com

**Deb Logan**
Executive Director
Blue Zones Project–Southwest Florida
Deb.Logan@sharecare.com

*Photos courtesy of NCH Healthcare and Blue Zones Project–Southwest Florida.*