

Promoting healthy choices to improve community well-being

In 2013, Fort Worth stood at an unimpressive 185 out of 190 reported metro areas on the Gallup National Health and Well-Being Index. During the following year, plans to improve that ranking were undertaken by Texas Health Resources, the city of Fort Worth, the Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce and other community leaders.

The partners agreed to pursue their goals through Blue Zones Project, a community-led well-being improvement initiative based on the research of Dan Buettner, a National Geographic Explorer and Fellow and award-winning journalist who discovered five places in the world – dubbed Blue Zones – where people live the longest, healthiest lives. Blue Zones Project aims to make healthy choices easier through permanent changes to a community's environment, policy and social networks.

"Our engagement with Blue Zones Project stems from an evaluation of whether we were fulfilling our mission," said Barclay Berdan, Texas Health Resources CEO. "Our mission is to improve the health of the people in the communities we serve. How can we do a better job of pursuing and living the mission? We had a lot of conversations with other leaders in the community about how to have a lasting impact on well-being."

David Tesmer, Texas Health Resources chief community and policy officer, played a leading role in bringing Blue Zones Project to Fort Worth. "Being a faith-based nonprofit, Blue Zones Project is a natural fit in our effort to be proactive in the health and well-being of our community," he said.

Matthew Dufrene, a Texas Health Resources vice president who leads Blue Zones Project work in the Fort Worth area, emphasized that the program is a communitywide initiative. "We have worked with more than 500 partners to date, and that number continues to grow."

Blue Zones Project targeted health objectives from many different standpoints, such as:

- Healthier food options in restaurants, grocery stores and schools.
- Increased opportunities to stay physically active through walking groups and parks.
- Policy objectives to influence the built environment, tobacco use and the availability and consumption of healthful foods.

The broad coalition of participants ultimately included more than 340 worksites, schools, restaurants, grocery stores and faith-based communities. Financial support came from more than 20 entities, including some of Fort Worth's largest employers, health care systems and philanthropic foundations.

"Our community partners provided invaluable input on how to address food deserts and food insecurity within the city," Tesmer said. "Blue Zones Project has donated more than 200,000 pounds of produce to underserved areas, and we've worked together to change city ordinances to help expand the availability of fresh food carts."

Blue Zones Project established a Double Up Food Bucks program in multiple locations across Fort Worth. The program allows low-income families eligible for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits to obtain fresh fruits and vegetables for half the price they would pay at a



DOUBLE THE BENEFITS: The Double Up Food Bucks program in a high-need Fort Worth community allows low-income families eligible for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits to obtain fresh fruits and vegetables for half the price they would pay at a farmers market or grocery store.

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In 2019, Fort Worth's equivalent rank on the Gallup National Health and Well-Being Index shot up to 31st (tied) out of 156 metro areas.

"Our efforts helped raise well-being in Fort Worth," Berdan said. "The city became a certified Blue Zones Community in late 2018, the largest in the country."

When COVID-19 hit in early 2020, Blue Zones Project realigned its efforts to respond. The program provided vaccinations and COVID-19 educational materials, Dufrene said.

Blue Zones Project served as a conduit

for multiple community partners and sought innovative ways to increase food access during the pandemic. Blue Zones Project worked with schools, community centers and homeless services to provide funding for essential hygiene supplies for 450 families. Books and supplies were provided to schools, community centers and homeless shelters.

Dufrene said Blue Zones Project initiatives are replicable, but it takes long-term commitment by elected officials, community leaders, chambers of commerce and hospital systems. "A high level of collaboration is required." ●