

# BLUE ZONES

“Healthy citizens are the greatest asset any country can have.” – Winston S. Churchill

## Creating home for the holidays – why affordable housing matters



Immokalee Foundation students prepare the ground for a foundation to be poured at the Learning Lab housing development. SUBMITTED

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Tucked away on a quiet parcel of land that abuts a citrus orchard on one side and a drainage canal on the other, sits the poured foundation of the first of 18 new single-family homes coming to Immokalee.

These traditional three-bedroom, two-bath homes are being built (under the guidance of BCB Homes) by Immokalee high school and ITech students participating in The Immokalee Foundation’s Career Pathways Engineering and Construction Management program.

The first home in what The Immokalee Foundation is calling the Learning Lab, is scheduled to be completed by the summer and upon sale, each unit will be required to be owner occupied. Assuring consistent and permanent occupancy increases property values and new development ownership offers another opportunity for Immokalee residents to live where they work and build generational wealth in their hometown.

This concept is important to The Immokalee Foundation and the Community Redevelopment Agency board members who would like to see more students return to Immokalee to serve their community after graduating from col-

lege. However, more lucrative job markets and cities with lower living costs tend to attract them elsewhere.

While 100% of The Immokalee Foundation’s students graduate high school and 91% of them will earn a post-secondary degree, the majority of them return to Southwest Florida to begin their career. Until they can afford to purchase their own home, more affordable housing is needed and, if planned effectively, the development or redevelopment projects that ensue can create jobs for these students to fill when they return home.

The Shimberg Center at the University of Florida estimated that 40% of all Collier County households (58,685 households) were cost burdened in 2015. Of these 58,685 households, 29,342 were considered Severely Cost Burdened meaning more than 50% of their gross household income goes to rent.

Not many would disagree that access to fair housing should be a right, but how that right is accommodated is where smart development is paramount. Mixed use and higher density development can create city centers where residents can live, work and play in the same space while increasing tax revenues that can improve services, like public transportation, as a result.

Additionally, when the percentage of

Area Median Income (% AMI) for housing is available at or below 30, residents tend to spend their savings in their community on healthier food and invest in better healthcare services. Not only does this decrease costs of subsidized healthcare while boosting the local economy, but a healthier home environment also leads to better educational opportunities and improved employment stability for families, and a more diverse workforce for the community.

Looking beyond severely cost burdened households, there were more than 700 homeless individuals counted in Collier County last year according to the Collier County Hunger & Homeless Coalition. To date, 48 of them have been re-housed.

Additionally, 2019 was the first year that homeless veterans were counted as an isolated demographic in Collier County. Thus far, Wounded Warriors of Collier County has identified 70 veterans, some with families, who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness, but housing options beyond the organization’s already full Alpha House are sparse or require relocation.

This year, “home for the holidays” has a very different meaning. Many of us will stay home and forgo the traditional family celebrations that are dear to our hearts. Warm hugs and meals with loved ones may be missed, but the

list of things we can be grateful for, including the roof over our head, continues to grow when we consider those who do not have a place to call home or struggle severely to provide one.

Here are several organizations you can help give the gift of home:

**Wounded Warriors of Collier County:** [woundedwarriorsofcolliercounty.com/campaigns/donate/](https://woundedwarriorsofcolliercounty.com/campaigns/donate/)

**The Immokalee Foundation:** [immokaleefoundation.org/donate/](https://immokaleefoundation.org/donate/)

**Collier County Hunger & Homeless Coalition:** [collierhomelesscoalition.org/](https://collierhomelesscoalition.org/)

**The Shelter for Abused Women & Children:** [naplesshelter.org/donate/](https://naplesshelter.org/donate/)

**Habitat for Humanity of Collier County:** Now accepting volunteers as well as donations. [habitatcollier.org/donate/](https://habitatcollier.org/donate/)

*Brought to Southwest Florida by NCH Healthcare System, in collaboration with Sharecare, Inc., Blue Zones Project is a vital part of Southwest Florida’s well-being improvement initiative that encourages changes in the community that lead to healthier options. For more information about Blue Zones Project Southwest Florida, visit [southwestflorida.bluezonesproject.com](https://southwestflorida.bluezonesproject.com).*

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