

BLUE ZONES

“It takes more than just a good looking body. You've got to have the heart and soul to go with it.” – Epictetus

Southwest Florida agency receives \$100,000 grant



The Food Policy Council was launched by Blue Zones Project last fall. Over 60 partners and advocates who operate within the local food system from food pantries and local farms to Lee and Collier School Districts and restaurants attended the summit in a commitment to improve healthy food access through local policy work and systematic or environmental changes. SUBMITTED

Megan Greer

Blue Zones Project - SWFL

The Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council (SWFRPC) has been awarded the Aetna Foundation's Healthier Cities and Counties Challenge \$100,000 grant.

In partnership with Blue Zones Project SWFL, Drug Free Collier County, Collier Department of Health, Florida Gulf Coast University Department of Social Work, University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences and University of Florida College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, the SWFRPC will engage community partners and residents to establish a Food Policy Council to address food insecurity in Collier County.

The Blue Zones Project launched the formation of the Food Policy Council last fall. More than 60 partners and advocates who operate within the local food system from food pantries and local farms to Lee and Collier School Districts and restaurants attending the summit in a commitment to improve healthy food access through local policy work and systematic or environmental changes.

With the help of the HCC grant, the Food Policy Council aims to:

- Strengthen communication and partnership across sectors to ensure a resilient food supply
- Address local food deserts
- Improve the dissemination of produce from local farms to local institutions and hunger relief organizations
- Build engagement from the community

The ultimate goal is to create reliable access to healthy, affordable food for everyone. The onset of the COVID pandemic exposed many strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for the Food Policy Council to address.

While many organizations within the food system quickly adapted to the new restrictions of the pandemic and maintained services for

their respective clientele, many organizations faced disruptions in accurate communication, supply, funding and distribution.

In addition, millions of Americans who had never experienced food insecurity suddenly found themselves in a new world of navigating their way through food pantries, school food assistance programs and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) often referred to as food stamps.

In 2019, 46 million Americans — including one in four children — participated in SNAP according to the organization's website. The program's total operating budget was \$60.35 billion. Still most families using SNAP have at least one full-time working adult in the household and tend to run out of benefits about three weeks into each month.

On April 22, the Trump Administration approved the Families First Coronavirus Response Act increasing emergency SNAP benefits by \$2 billion/month to meet the heightened demand for food amidst the pandemic. This is a 40% increase in SNAP benefits. The USDA has not yet released SNAP participation numbers past March, but enrollment in Florida jumped 36% from February to March 2020.

Questionably, the greatest challenge with the SNAP program is that there are no nutritional guidelines that regulate the purchase of healthy food. As a result, families utilizing SNAP tend to purchase cheaper processed foods, instead of whole foods, that allow their funds to stretch further into the month. These foods lack nutritional density and are often high in sugar and unhealthy fats.

According to a study done at the National Institutes of Health, participants who had access to processed foods throughout the day, ate an average of 508 calories more per day than the control group that was fed a whole foods diet. Processed foods also take less energy to burn resulting in an even higher retention of caloric intake. On average, those who were on a diet of processed foods gained two pounds per week.

As such, it is no surprise that there is a direct correlation between food insecurity and obesity and chronic disease in the US. Obesity related illnesses cost the US approximately \$190 billion per year in health care expenditures.

Dr. Dariush Mozaffarian, Tufts University's Dean of the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, has been regularly bringing attention to the problem of obesity and the resulting disproportional susceptibility to COVID-19 during his discussions with mainstream media. According to Dr. Mozaffarian, only 12% of Americans are metabolically healthy.

This is a crisis that the USDA is trying to fight with a newer program called Fresh Access Bucks (FAB) that allows SNAP participants to double their dollars when purchasing fresh produce at participating markets.

And the Blue Zones Project has announced that the Blue Zones Project Approved Le Grande Caribbean Market in Immokalee is the first market in the state of Florida to offer the FAB program.

With the help of the HCC grant, the Food Policy Council will work with partners to continue to set the pace for better healthy food access in the state of Florida. The grant will span two years and at its end, the Food Policy Council intends to be established as its own sustainable, governing entity acting as an information and process hub for the local food system.

The Council hopes to empower both organizations and individuals to improve health and fight disease through nutritionally sound practices that are supported through economically prudent policy, systems and environmental improvements.

To learn more about the HCC grant, please visit: <https://www.aetna-foundation.org/grants-partnerships/healthiest-cities-counties-challenge.html>

Megan Greer serves as worksite and policy lead for the Blue Zones Project-Southwest Florida.