

"A doctor may know more than a peasant but a peasant and a doctor know more together." - Dan Buettner, "Thrive: Finding Happiness the Blue Zones Way"



Lisa Brown, director of employee health & wellness at the NCH Healthcare System, talks about the Blue Zones Project recognizing NCH with "Workplace Well-Being Award." PHOTOS SUBMITTED: BLUE ZONES PROJECT

NCH HEALTHCARE SYSTEM EARNs WELL-BEING AWARD

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The NCH Healthcare System is setting an example with the Blue Zones Project: It has been recognized for improving employee health.

The hospital system, which is spearheading the Blue Zones Project in Southwest Florida, received a "Workplace Well-Being" award recently for measures taken to help employees improve their health. NCH has 4,600 employees.

Also, Gulf Coast Charter Academy South has received a "Healthy School" award for improving health habits of students and for environmental stewardship.

The Blue Zones Project is a long-term initiative that began locally in 2015 to convince employers, government agencies, schools, businesses, churches and residential communities to adopt practices that can change behavior over time to be healthier.

National Geographic explorer Dan Buettner developed the Blue Zones Project based on his worldwide travels. He found common elements among residents in different parts of the world who enjoy great longevity and often live to 100.

The common elements became his "Power 9" principles for longevity, which address diet, emotional outlook, physical activity and social engagement. He wrote a book, called "The Blue Zones" and it became a New York Times bestseller.

Today, more than 42 communities are following a blueprint to become Blue Zones communities with the help of



Students at Gulf Coast Charter Academy South celebrate receiving "Healthy School Award" from the Blue Zones Project recently.

consultants with Sharecare, a digital health company that provides evidence-based programs that can achieve results.

NCH Healthcare System

Eight years ago, NCH made changes to its employee insurance plan that makes employees accountable for their behavior. The changes started with a ban on hiring people who smoke, and evolved over time to include incentives of reduced deductibles. In 2015, NCH launched the Blue Zones Project and became a worksite model.

A new case study about the NCH workforce found employee well-being has improved since 2015. The overall well-being score was 68.9 percent in

2015 and it rose to 71.7 percent the following year, based on the Gallup-Sharecare well-being index.

Nearly 10 percent more employees report exercising 30 minutes at least a three days a week. The report did not state what percentage of employees exercise.

When it comes to diet, 34 percent of employees made changes to what they eat, with a greater focus on a plant-based diet, and saw an improvement in their body mass index, the data shows.

NCH added a walking route around the Baker Hospital Downtown, and developed walking maps around its other campuses. Fitness classes are available to all employees.

All beverages from NCH cafeterias and vending machine that contain sug-

ar were removed, and that led to a \$7,000 drop in sales of sugar beverages each month.

When a walking and water infusion bottle project was started, 830 employees logged 330,000 miles of walking since 2016.

From a financial standpoint, NCH saw a \$27 million saving over three years on employees health expenditures.

"We have not raised health insurance premiums for colleagues for the past four years and, in fact, lowered them for single parents who are already economically stressed," Dr. Allen Weiss, NCH president and chief executive officer, said in a letter to colleagues in the

See BLUE ZONES, Page 9D

Blue Zones

Continued from Page 6D

report.

Gulf Coast Charter Academy South

Gulf Coast Charter, at 215 Airport-Pulling Road North, was recognized for more students making decisions to be healthier. The school has 690 students from kindergarten through eighth grade.

The school saw a 20 percent increase in healthier lunch purchases, and students logged 26,000 miles walking.

Two teachers at the school, Nadia Yusuf and Brittany Fangmeier, started the Blue Zones Project in the 2015-16 school year. It gained its Blue Zones approval in 2016.

Students walk before or after lunch, in addition to recess, and they have a quiet jumper jack area to help them cope with being in lines, Yusuf said.

The students have 13 different garden beds around the campus where they can eat what they grow, and they can learn how to make smoothies from some of the greens during a Blue Zones Health Club. They also learn yoga in the program.

Yusuf said the students are more engaged and happy to be in school since they are part of keeping it healthier and re-using water bottles.

"Our test scores have gone up," she said.

Engaging kids to take responsibility for maintaining the gardens and reusing old water bottles helps them feel connected and happy to come to school, she said.

"Gulf Coast Charter Academy South is committed to providing a learning environment that supports students and promote wellness, nutrition, and an active lifestyle," the project leaders stated in its recognition application. "Through this, we recognize the positive relationship between nutrition, physical activity, and the development of learning in our students."