

“This sweet potato—high in flavonoids, vitamin C, fiber, carotenoids, and slow-burning carbohydrates—is one of the healthiest foods on the planet.” - Dan Buettner, *The Blue Zones Solution: Eating and Living Like the World's Healthiest People*



Florida Blue employees at Coconut Point celebrate their Blue Zones Project recognition. HEALTHWAYS

Florida Blue insurer joins Blue Zones Project

Liz Freeman Naples Daily News | USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

The state's largest insurer, Florida Blue, has taken on the Blue Zones Project.

The Jacksonville-based insurance company with a local office in Estero has gained approval as a Blue Zones Project worksite for adopting new practices so employees in the Estero office can get healthier.

Three other organizations have joined the Blue Zones Project initiative underway in Southwest Florida. They are It Starts With Your Health, Plan B Connections and Celebration Beach Church.

More than 100 businesses, organizations, residential communities or government agencies have embraced the initiative by adopting a series of actions or policy changes for employees to have at their exposure to make healthier choices in daily practices. The idea is that opting for a healthy snack or taking a walk during a break will become habit and replace less-healthy behaviors.

The Florida Blue branch office at Coconut Point in Estero changed out vending machine snacks with healthier options and it is encouraging employees to take movement breaks during their day and to take advantage of a new qui-

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Florida Blue

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et space to reduce stress. With open enrollment underway for people signing up for coverage under the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, and for open enrollment underway for employer-based coverage, agents and other staff are working extra hard.

“Our mission at Florida Blue is to help people and communities achieve better health, which perfectly aligns with the goals of the Blue Zones Project,” Jack Hatfield, senior manager of the Florida Blue Center at Coconut Point, said. “The health of a community cannot be transformed by only one person or company. It takes all of us working together and contributing in our own unique ways to improve the health of our neighbors, family, coworkers and customers.”

Hatfield has 21 employees at the Coconut office, ranging from sales people to customer service representatives and a handful in small clinic for basic screenings. To gain Blue Zones status, they developed walking maps around the area, bring in fruit on Mondays for healthier snacks and order healthier food for meals, he said.

“We started about a year ago, making these changes,” he said. “It’s just little tweaks that have gone a long way.”

Employees are losing weight, are feeling more mindful and healthy, he said.

It Starts With Your Wellness helps people relieve anxiety and stress for clients, has been recognized as a Blue Zones project company for offering guest speakers on various health-related topics and helping to convince people to be use non-sugary beverages in office settings.

Plan B Connections helps members connect to organizations and causes for volunteering, according to Lisa Cook, who launched the networking group earlier this year.

“I connect people to opportunities, to other people,” Cook said, whose career was in career counseling before moving to Naples in May. She had an earlier brand of a “meet up” network in Minnesota.

With Plan B, she helps people get connected to others with like-minded

activities, which can be helpful when people are actively looking for a new job or want to help others get linked to charitable organizations. She organizes small get togethers for breakfast meetings and painting groups for the Empty Bowls fundraiser to help feed the needy that’s held in Cambier Park annually.

Getting involved in volunteer-based programs, or staying connected with others, is one of nine principals of the Blue Zones project for better health and greater longevity. Social isolation and loneliness can contribute to declining health and that’s backed up by research, Cook said.

“It is about life purpose,” she said.

The Blue Zones Project was introduced to the region in 2015 based on the world travels of Dan Buettner, who identified communities worldwide where people share lifestyle traits and live to 100 or older. He wrote a New York Times bestseller about the nine principles of longevity.

The “Power Nine” include moving naturally by being physically active, knowing your purpose in life, taking time to relax, having a healthy social network and putting loved ones first. A popular activity is to form walking groups, or walking moais, to use Blue Zones terminology.

Other Blue Zones principles include participating in a religious community, limiting alcohol consumption, eating a plant-slant diet and stopping to eat when you are 80 percent full.

Project consultants work with communities to identify strengths and gaps, and offers tools and resources so employers, schools, restaurants, grocery stores and other entities can take various steps to make healthier choices easier.

The NCH Healthcare System is underwriting the Blue Zones initiative in Collier and south Lee counties over the next 8 years, to make health-focused changes in workplaces, schools, government entities, restaurants, grocery stores and physical settings. The belief is that the healthier choices become engrained and become a way of life.

Celebration Beach church gained Blue Zones recognition by becoming a tobacco-free campus, incorporating stretching and moving, developing a well-being series and promoting volunteerism.



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