

**BLUE TIP:** “What can add on more good years? Robert Kane: Rather than exercising for the sake of exercising, try to make changes to your lifestyle. Ride a bicycle instead of driving. Walk to the store instead of driving. Use the stairs instead of the elevator. Build that into your lifestyle. The chances are that you will sustain that behavior for a much longer time.”

— Dan Buettner, *The Blue Zones, Second Edition: 9 Lessons for Living Longer From the People Who've Lived the Longest*



NCH Healthcare System employees enjoy healthy foods endorsed by the Blue Zones Project.

PHOTOS SUBMITTED: BLUE ZONES PROJECT STAFF

# HOSPITAL SYSTEM BECOMES BLUE ZONES STANDOUT

LIZ FREEMAN

LIZ.FREEMAN@NAPLESNEWS.COM; 239-263-4778

The NCH Healthcare System is sold on employee wellness and what it can achieve.

The hospital system began a campaign in 2009 to convince employees to change bad habits and get healthier.

Two years ago, NCH introduced an initiative to Southwest Florida to work toward becoming a Blue Zones Project community to improve the region's health.

The campaign in both regards is paying off.

NCH recently became the first worksite in the state to earn certification through the Blue Zones Project, where a majority of employees are embracing behavior changes to get healthier.

The hospital system has 4,300 employees and 2,150 have signed pledges to get healthier.

It also is the first hospital system in the nation to become Blue Zones certified, according to program officials.

The project aims to convince people to engage in healthier lifestyles to improve longevity and well-being. It is based on the world travels of Dan Buettner, who worked for National Geographic and realized there are



The NCH Healthcare System celebrates becoming a Blue Zones Project certified worksite.

shared lifestyle traits among populations in geographic areas who live to 100 longer.

He wrote a book in 2010 outlining his “Power Nine” principles of longevity that became a New York Times bestseller.

NCH says it has seen a 54 percent drop in health care spending in the past three years for a combined savings of \$27 million. There's also been improvements in employee well-being based on a Gallup-Sharecare measurements, and 34 percent of employees report their body mass index has improved, accord-

ing to Blue Zones officials.

“Well-being is our mission and our promise, for those we serve and our employees,” Dr. Allen Weiss, president and chief executive officer of NCH, said in a statement. “That's why we're making substantive changes on our campuses, improving the foods we serve in our cafeterias, eliminating sugar-based beverages, and working with local producers to have onsite farmers market. Each of these actions reinforce the idea that healthy doesn't have to be hard. We are creating success for patients, employees, and the

community at large.”

On the community level, more than 60 organizations, from businesses to residential communities, have committed to the project by adopting health-focused actions with a check list of practices.

NCH achieving certification is a more intensive undertaking involving a customized checklist of best practices, said Deb Logan, executive director of the project in Southwest Florida.

At a ribbon cutting May 24 to celebrate NCH becoming a certified Blue Zones worksite, Nick Buettner spoke about the hospital system's achievement. He serves as community and corporate program director for the Blue Zones project and is the brother of the founder. He pointed out how NCH employees logged 4,000 hours of volunteerism in one year.

“That says a lot about you as individuals,” Buettner said.

In addition, more than 1,000 employees joined a walking group or potluck group — known as a Moai to use a concept from Okinawa, Japan, that translates to mean coming together for a common purpose. Okinawa is one of the original Blue Zones communities.

Currently, 42 communities in nine states are engaged in Blue Zones campaigns to get healthier.