

The Challenge: In 2012 and the years prior, Marion community leaders were cognizant of a number of factors - the national obesity epidemic, rising health insurance costs and the need to keep up with rapid community growth. Between 2000 and 2010, Marion's population grew by more than 32%. While the City and its economic development partners worked to stay ahead of the growth, outgrowing infrastructure and losing community connectedness were real concerns.

Up to that point, the community had built a successful track record of finding the necessary resources to get things done. Community leaders recognized the importance of making the well-being of residents a priority – through initiatives such as a community visioning process, development of a central corridor reconstruction plan and a commitment to complete streets and trails. City and community leaders identified the Blue Zones Project® as an overarching well-being initiative that could address these challenges through the power of partnerships.

Brought to Iowa through an innovative sponsorship by Wellmark Blue Cross and Blue Shield, in collaboration with Healthways and Blue Zones®, the Blue Zones Project is a community well-being improvement initiative designed to make healthy choices easier through permanent changes to environment, policy and social networks.

Marion recognized that participation in the program could benefit the health and well-being of residents, and help keep healthcare costs at bay for businesses.

Through efforts championed by the Marion Chamber of Commerce, Marion participated in a competitive application process to participate in the Blue Zones Project.

To qualify, Marion demonstrated a collective community desire to make transformational change. Economic development partners, school districts, grocery stores, restaurants and worksites publicly supported the efforts joined by individuals at the grassroots level.

Implementation and costs: Marion was selected and officially began its quest to become a certified Blue Zones Community® in 2014.

Blue Zones began as a National Geographic expedition to find pockets around the world where people live measurably longer. The secrets to well-being and longevity are found in a holistic approach that includes moving naturally, having the right outlook, eating wisely and connecting with a healthy social network. The goal of the program is to take this research and replicate the conditions locally. The program provides assistance from international experts to develop and implement a blueprint for residents to ultimately live longer, happier lives. The program recognizes that well-being cannot be improved without committed partnerships. A leadership team consisting of representatives from city government, schools, healthcare, public health and the business community championed this effort, with assistance from 10 subcommittees focused on community policy, school policy, grocery stores and restaurants, worksites, engagement and purpose. The committee work resulted in hundreds of new, passionate volunteers.

Blue Zones Project required an extensive educational effort by community leaders, volunteers and staff members, who fanned out through Marion enlisting individuals, schools, workplaces, restaurants and grocery stores, as well as effecting changes in policy and the built environment that would lead to better health.

Acceptance into the program included well over \$1 million invested into the community by Wellmark and Healthways over two years in the form of staffing,

equipment, supplies and Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index® data collection.

Community partners supported the effort in multiple ways. Businesses injected funds into employee well-being efforts, grocery stores modified displays and check-out lanes to promote healthy foods, schools instituted brain breaks and walking school buses. Over 20% of Marion residents pledged to improve their physical, emotional or social well-being and completed at least one action item such as growing a garden, getting a pet, discovering their purpose, replacing dinnerware with smaller plates or volunteering.

A number of community amenities - new roundabouts, an alley placemaking project and a safe routes to school plan – have found financial and community support in the quest to improve walkability and connectivity in Marion.

Half of the city's top 20 workplaces instituted policies that would promote health and well-being, such as having CSA shares distributed at work, creating designated quiet spaces, encouraging volunteering or offering healthier vending machine options.

Free, outdoor Saturday morning yoga classes were established – thanks to partnerships with area yoga instructors and support from the Parks and Recreation Department – reaching more than 1,250 participants to date.

Marion hosted Dan Burden, an internationally recognized authority on livable and sustainable communities, healthy streets, traffic calming, and bicycle and pedestrian programs on two occasions. Blue Zones founder, Dan Buettner, visited Marion as well.

A community garden was launched on city-owned land in partnership with Master Gardeners and volunteers, with all produce donated to a local food pantry.

Marion is home to the first Blue Zones certified high school in the nation – where students instituted a fresh fruit cart, raised funds to install a water-refilling station and participated in a purpose workshop. Nine schools have established gardens on-site.

Measurable outcomes: In September 2015, in a matter of 18 months, Marion became the 12th community in the nation to become Blue Zones certified.

To date, more than 38,000 lives have been impacted and 7,963 individuals pledged to support well-being. Sixty-six percent of Marion's locally owned restaurants, 46% of Marion's public schools and 40% of Marion's grocery stores completed action items on a pledge to earn sector designation. All have optimized their environments to help make Marion one of the healthiest cities in the nation. And others are taking notice, in 2015 Iowa's governor presented Marion with the Healthy Iowa Award for a large city.

The number of Marion residents who report eating healthy increased nearly 22% since 2012, highlighting the impact of a new urban agriculture ordinance, community gardens and an edible orchard.

Marion parks are free of tobacco litter and the air is smoke-free due to a nicotine-free parks and trails ordinance that includes e-cigarettes and vaporizers. Marion was the first in the state to accomplish this and has been a resource for more than a dozen other cities looking to do the same.

Free exercise classes, walking moais, cooking classes and other adult-focused programs have become commonplace since beginning the Blue Zones journey.

The fall of 2016 Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index shows a citywide gain of more than four points in overall well-being and an increase in each of the five elements of well-being: purpose, social, financial, community and physical well-being. The city's overall Well-Being Index score rose 4.4 points, or 7%, from 61.8 in 2014 to 66.2 in 2016. The city's overall well-being score of 66.2 is well above national and state levels. Obesity is down 19 points, a drop of nearly 55% since 2014 and well under both national and state levels.

Marion's commitment to adopting meaningful health and well-being improvement initiatives for residents is paying off. The study also revealed that 80 percent of residents feel that Marion is the perfect place for them.

Lessons learned: This program provided a grassroots mechanism for bringing about change and improving the well-being of the community. Neighbors, teachers and community leaders made tremendous strides in optimizing connectedness and bringing about change. The City learned the significance the built environment can have in how citizens make decisions that influence their well-being. Through many small, positive changes happening simultaneously, the multiplier effect ripples through the entire community. Further, this program brought a number of non-traditional partners to the table and the benefits were far-reaching.

Raises awareness of Managers: The Blue Zones Project focus on health and well-being is reflected throughout the community.

Community engagement and volunteerism in Marion have reached new heights in the last three years with people of all walks of life engaging with the Blue Zones Project. With more than 41,032 volunteer hours logged by 4,755 people, volunteers in Marion added \$912,962 in value to our community.

Perhaps the greatest quantitative proof of the program's success can be found in the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index® data. The partnerships that emerged as a result of this program have laid a strong foundation. The investment in personal and collective well-being across all sectors – schools, restaurants, grocery stores, worksites, local government – will pay dividends for future generations.

Marion is proud of its investment in well-being for a more livable, vibrant and healthier future.