



Vitality Project

Helping you live longer, better

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Albert Lea Residents Add 3.1 Years of Life Expectancy AARP/Blue Zones Vitality Project Inspired Residents to Make Simple Changes, Transforming an Entire Community

ALBERT LEA, Minn (October 13, 2009) – The **AARP®/Blue Zones® Vitality Project sponsored by United Health Foundation** today announced that the life expectancy of the citizens of Albert Lea increased an average of 3.1 years per person during the unprecedented 10-month city-wide health makeover. The project was designed to inspire residents to take charge of their health so that they can live longer, better.

More than 2,300 residents followed the Vitality Compass®—an interactive tool on www.aarp.org/bluezonesproject that helps measure an individual's projected life expectancy based on current behaviors.

“Congratulations to Albert Lea for showing that by taking on this project in full force, one small town in America can become a model for improving health,” said Nancy Graham, Editor, *AARP The Magazine*. “We’re looking forward to sharing the results of their efforts with our 40 million members in our January/February issue and coming back in 2010 for a one-year check-in.”

“We at the United Health Foundation are proud to have underwritten this project,” said Daniel Johnson, executive director, United Health Foundation. “The people of Albert Lea have demonstrated that by making modest changes, a community can make meaningful health improvements.”

Since January 2009, community leaders have been working to make changes to their community that will promote health and longevity. The AARP®/Blue Zones® Vitality Project was an unprecedented attempt to put into practice the principles

that Blue Zones founder Dan Buettner discovered while exploring places around the world where people live extraordinarily long and healthy lives.

“The key to success was staying away from guilt, struggle, and sacrifice. Unlike other public health initiatives, we took much of the focus off of a strict diet or exercise plan. Instead, we based the project on what I learned in the Blue Zones and focused on improving habitat, social networks, community infrastructure and the residents’ sense of purpose,” said Buettner.

As a result of the Vitality Project, important changes were made in the way residents eat, work, exercise, and play.

First, the community infrastructure and environment was improved in Albert Lea:

- With the help of University of Minnesota’s Dr. Leslie Lytle, school district policies were changed to encourage healthy eating and more physical activity;
- A major walking/biking trail was completed around Fountain Lake to encourage residents to make movement an everyday part of life. Local government entities hastened work on their plans for more walking and biking.
- Dozens of school children used “walking school buses” as an alternative to driving and carpools where parents and grandparents walked neighborhood children to and from school in groups.
- 35 employers, with a combined 4,358 local employees, signed a pledge to improve their workplaces to increase longevity.

Second, individuals and families improved their habitat by making intentionally subtle changes that encouraged healthy eating and natural physical movement.

- With the help of healthy eating expert Dr. Brian Wansink, the town’s employers transformed their workplaces by encouraging healthy behaviors;
- 68 percent of locally-owned restaurants improved their menus with food that promotes longevity; and individuals learned how to make simple changes in their kitchen and home.
- Local grocery stores promoted “longevity tags” to showcase healthy eating, and community leaders encouraged gardening in new community gardens and at home.

Third, social circles were emphasized and encouraged, because who your friends are has a powerful impact on your long-term health behaviors.

- More than 600 citizens of Albert Lea joined walking “moais”—or social groups—to promote exercise while strengthening social bonds and bringing neighbors together. Collectively the moais walked more than 75 million steps, or 37,558 miles.

And, finally, residents were given the opportunity to explore their “purpose” in life and to give back to their community. Having a sense of purpose is a key factor in increasing your life expectancy.

- More than 150 volunteers joined as “Vitality Project Ambassadors” to promote this project.
- Citizens logged more than 2,200 hours worth of additional community service hours.
- More than 1,000 residents participated in a “Purpose Seminar” led by national purpose expert Dr. Richard Leider.

The town leaders plan to continue the progress toward a healthier city and *AARP The Magazine* will feature the project in its January/February issue, in addition to returning to Albert Lea in a year to track the progress. Additional information can be found at www.aarp.org/bluezonesproject.

About AARP

AARP is a nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization that helps people 50+ have independence, choice and control in ways that are beneficial and affordable to them and society as a whole. AARP does not endorse candidates for public office or make contributions to either political campaigns or candidates. We produce AARP The Magazine, the definitive voice for 50+ Americans and the world's largest-circulation magazine with over 34.5 million readers; AARP Bulletin, the go-to news source for AARP's nearly 40 million members and Americans 50+; AARP Segunda Juventud, the only bilingual U.S. publication dedicated exclusively to the 50+ Hispanic community; and our website, AARP.org. AARP Foundation is an affiliated charity that provides security, protection, and empowerment to older persons in need with support from thousands of volunteers, donors, and sponsors. We have staffed offices in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

About Blue Zones®

Founded by Dan Buettner as an ongoing project that is part of Quest Network, Inc., Blue Zones® studies the world's longest-lived populations for wellness information and lifestyle management tools that can help Americans live longer, healthier lives. For each Blue Zones® expedition, Buettner and his award-winning team journey to a specific region whose population is reaching age 100 at an extraordinarily high rate. These longevity hotspots are called “Blue Zones®” Buettner and his team of scientists identify and study the regions' common threads in lifestyle behavior, diet, outlook and stress-coping mechanisms. Through this ongoing study, Blue Zones® has developed a formula of the world's best practices in healthy longevity that people can put to work in their own lives. In short, Buettner aims to help everyone live within their personal “Blue Zone.” Buettner's research and his insight into enhancing longevity has been published in his *New York Times* bestselling book, *THE BLUE ZONES: Lessons for Living Longer by the People Who've Lived the Longest*, which was published by National Geographic Book in 2008. Partially funded by the National Institutes on Health, Blue Zones® is advised by an internationally-recognized panel of academic and scientific experts on the topic, and supported by the National Geographic Expeditions Council. For more information, visit www.bluezones.com.

About the United Health Foundation

Guided by a passion to help people live healthier lives, United Health Foundation supports activities that expand access to quality health care services for those in challenging circumstances and partners with others to improve the well being of communities. The Foundation also provides helpful information to support decisions that lead to better health outcomes and healthier communities. Since established by UnitedHealth Group [NYSE: UNH] in 1999 as a not for profit private foundation, the Foundation has committed more than \$160 million to improve health and health care. For more information, visit www.unitedhealthfoundation.org.