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Edition**

**USA
TODAY**



News
October 19, 2009

Vitality Project's long-term changes make Minn. town healthier

By Mary Brophy Marcus
USA TODAY



Dan Buettner helped launch the project with the goal of helping residents live longer.

It was a novel idea. Pick a family-friendly, midsized American town, give its residents ideas on how they can live healthier and longer lives, put the ideas into action one summer and see what happens.

This past June, USA TODAY wrote about Albert Lea, Minn., where longevity explorer Dan Buettner, author of *The Blue Zones*, and non-profit AARP decided to launch their "Vitality Project." The idea was to help the residents live longer, better

lives. Many who got involved in the United Health Foundation-sponsored event say it changed their lives for the better, and some plan to continue a healthier way of living, even though the project wrapped up last week.

"It worked. It worked because we did not focus on short-term diet and exercise programs," Buettner says. "We focused on changing their environments and then optimizing social networks."

AARP and Buettner reported last week that more than 2,300 residents followed the Vitality Compass, an interactive tool on aarp.org/bluezonesproject that helps measure an individual's projected life expectancy based on current behaviors. It was developed with help from scientists at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health using U.S. government data and information from more than 350 studies.

Large- and small-scale changes were made across town to motivate residents, Buettner says. Local leaders installed community gardens and added more sidewalks to encourage physical activity. Grocery stores labeled "longevity" foods, such as sweet potatoes, whole grains and beans.

Bob Furland's wife and two teenage sons loaded up the boys' television sets into his truck and dropped them off at his parents' house months ago so they wouldn't be tempted to watch TV.

"We also decided to plant a garden in our yard. We grew asparagus, broccoli, potatoes, green beans, herbs," says Furland, 46, a facilities manager at the local ice arena who lost about 20 pounds.

He said the garden inspired them to landscape their backyard, too. "We dug

a pond. My sister and her family started helping, and it brought our whole family together."

Restaurants, employers and schools participated, too.

The most popular initiatives involved walking, says Cathy Ventura-Merkel, senior vice president of AARP Publications.

"There is nothing that Albert Lea has implemented or accomplished that couldn't be replicated in every hometown across America," Ventura-Merkel says.

The results by the numbers

2.6 pounds - Amount the average person lost.

68% of Albert Lea's restaurants increased healthy fare and updated menus.

35 employers, encompassing more than 4,000 employees, improved longevity-promoting features in the workplace.

600 Albert Lea residents joined walking groups, collectively tallying more than 37,558 miles.

80 children participated in five "walking school buses," where kids walked with parents and grandparents to school instead of driving or taking the bus.

Sources: Dan Buettner, AARP