



Innovation Spotlight: Community Revitalization in Albert Lea, MN

Over the next few months, Joint Economic Committee Democrats will be highlighting cutting-edge policy solutions that empower small towns and rural communities across the nation.

Problem: Small towns around the nation are confronting multiple economic challenges associated with the public health of their communities. For instance, obesity not only costs Americans [nearly \\$200 billion](#) in health care expenses each year, but also negatively impacts the workforce and productivity.

Background: In 2009, Alberta Lea, Minnesota was selected as the first city nationwide to pilot the “Blue Zones Vitality Project.” Blue Zones are regions around the world where people [live longer and healthier lives](#). Dan Buettner, a National Geographic explorer and best-selling author, documented characteristics that these regions share. In collaboration with the [University of Minnesota](#), he chose Albert Lea based on its potential for improvement in key areas like public health and worker engagement.



Albert Lea, Minnesota

Solution: The Blue Zone Project’s chief goal is to make healthy choices easier for individuals through improvements to the community’s physical environment and the development of stronger social networks. Over the past nine years, Albert Lea has implemented a number of improvements. The city made local community design enhancements, adding [more than 9 miles](#) of new sidewalks to create a more active community environment.¹ Dozens of employers became designated “Blue Zone worksites,” which require long-term investments in the physical and emotional well-being of workers. And local schools revamped their food offerings so students could make more nutritious choices.

In all, the Blue Zones Project has resulted in broadly shared benefits across Albert Lea. Participants in the program are projected to see nearly three years added to their lifespans, and businesses are expected to save more than [\\$7.5 million in health care expenses](#) thanks to a more than 30 percent reduction in smoking. Freeborn County, where Albert Lea is the county seat, has also steadily improved its rank among the healthiest counties in Minnesota, [jumping from 68th to 34th](#) out of 87 counties since 2011.

Looking Ahead: With the success of the pilot in Albert Lea, Blue Zones Project communities have cropped up [across the nation](#), with residents hoping to see similar social and economic benefits. Projects have launched in Texas, Oregon, and Iowa, among other states, and have already delivered results for communities willing to incorporate evidence-based lifestyle changes into their day-to-day activities. The federal government can help accelerate these positive changes by investing in programs that boost well-being, from nutritious school lunch initiatives to grants that allow rural communities to build out sustainable new infrastructure. Blue Zones Project is a partnership between Blue Zones, LLC and Sharecare, Inc.

¹ Updated figure provided by the Albert Lea Blue Zones Project Organization Lead.