

Views of the Valley: Making the Valley a Blue Zone

BY GUS FAHEY

FOR THE VALLEY ADVANTAGE

“Blue Zones” are areas of the world where people live exceptionally long and happy lives. Would you like to live there?

The Lackawanna Valley took a step in June to become a Blue Zone Project community. After speaking with 150 people in focus groups, roundtables and other meetings, the national Blue Zones Project assessed our area and rendered a verdict: We're ready.

Our area has the organizations needed to transform local health and wellness. We have good initiatives started. We collaborate well. City and county leaders support these efforts.

We also have great need. Our area has higher than average tobacco use, inactivity and poor diet, among other risks. We rate low in community pride and sense of purpose. This means that changes we make in our communities will have a greater impact.

What would those changes be? In Blue Zones, it's the community environment that determines our health, much more than personal self-control. A good environment makes healthy choices easy choices.

To do that, we need to make walking and biking easier, safer — and more useful. We need to improve low-income access to nutritious food and recreation. Create a network of healthy lifestyle groups so new habits get reinforced through small-group connections. Rebuild our civic pride. Bring more people in community roles, so we're all responsible for our future.

Who does this work? In short, we all do. My organization, Valley In Motion, based in Mayfield, is talking to funders and other stakeholders about which projects would have the greatest impact on community well-being. But any project that reaches enough people will need to engage workplaces, schools, government, religious and civic organizations and other institutions that influence our behaviors and attitudes.

The investments of time and money are well worth it. Just a few staff can mobilize an army of volunteers and build trust with at-risk groups. Changing behaviors of just 10% of a population can be enough to reach a “tipping point”

to transform a whole community. More kids biking, cooking and gardening can build healthy habits for a lifetime.

The benefits add up. In a study Valley In Motion commissioned last year, we found the tri-county region could save \$952 million over 10 years in medical, productivity and regional economic impact costs. Of course, helping people before they have a chronic disease saves lives and money. But liking where you live, sup-

portive relationships and a purpose-filled life also makes us more productive and invested in each other's success.

I know our region has the will to make big changes because I see the new energy in the Upper Valley.

Residents are making great use of the Lackawanna River Heritage and D&H Trails. Jermyn is encouraging exercise and socialization with in-town walking routes. Forest City and Carbondale are redefining themselves as attractions for outdoor recreation. Carbondale's new Heart & Soul initiative engages residents to be change-makers in their city.

Because why live in a Blue Zone? It's not just so we can live to 100 years old at high rates. It's so all can live a good life. Healthy. Happy. Purposeful. Connected to our community and invested in its future.

As the Blue Zones Project assessment showed, we have what it takes to transform our communities. We just have to do it.

Gus Fahey is the president of Valley in Motion, a nonprofit that fosters community and quality of life in the Lackawanna Valley. Contact him at gus@valleyinmotion.org if you would like a copy of the NEPA Blue Zones Project Assessment or want to transform your community's well-being. Learn more at www.valleyinmotion.org.

What is Views of the Valley?

Views of the Valley is an occasional feature in which civic groups, nonprofits and other community-minded organizations in the Midvalley and Upvalley can tell readers about their projects. Interested in writing a Views of the Valley column? Email advantage@timeshamrock.com for more information.



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