



# MONTEREY COUNTY, CA

Monterey County becomes the first county to achieve certified Blue Zones Community<sup>®</sup> designation in the state of California.

A PROUD BLUE ZONES COMMUNITY







BE NATURALLY  
MANTÉNGASE ACTIVO  
BLUE ZONES PROJECT

FIND YOUR PURPOSE  
ENCUENTRE TU PROPÓSITO  
BLUE ZONES PROJECT

SHIFT  
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IGOS A LAS  
BLUE ZONES PROJECT



GRACIAS

CONGRATULATIONS  
MONTEREY COUNTY, FOR  
PUTTING WELL-BEING  
ON THE MAP!

In Monterey County, we are seizing every opportunity to move well-being in the right direction—becoming the first county in the state of California to achieve Blue Zones Community® certification.

**After launching Blue Zones Project® in our community, we've seen overall well-being and exercise rates increase, with more individuals thriving in life evaluation, while high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and tobacco use are on the decline.** Community leaders, business owners, teachers, and volunteers are coming together to transform our environments into places where optimal health ensues and a culture of well-being flourishes.

Our community's resurgence is happening. Monterey County has always been a great place to live, work, learn, and play. And it's only getting better.

We did this together. By putting our personal and collective well-being first, we're making healthy choices easier, creating more economic opportunities, and ensuring a better quality of life for everyone. Here's to making Monterey County one of the healthiest communities in California, where residents are living better, together.

# THE JOURNEY TO BECOME A BLUE ZONES COMMUNITY

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Blue Zones Project® helps communities implement the longevity and happiness lessons learned from the world's extraordinary people and cultures to measurably improve well-being and create enhanced community vitality. The method of work is to drive community-led semi-permanent and permanent change in man-made surroundings. This approach is designed to make healthier choices easier, more ubiquitous, and sustainable. The effect: people moving more naturally, taking more time to downshift daily, discovering the power of purpose, eating wisely, and deepening their connections with friends, family, and their faith. Over time, these collective choices compound to sustainably improve well-being. In 2018, a broad base of Monterey County's leadership set an initial seven-year course to do just that.

The value of Blue Zones Project is measured by the engagement of its citizens; the number, type, and scope of semi-permanent and permanent changes implemented; the prevalence and incidence rates of lifestyle risks and disease; and measurable improvements in well-being; all of which ultimately led to lower medical costs, better workforce productivity,

and a strengthened regional economy.

Since 2019, Monterey County has undergone its own community transformation, exceeding targets set to engage individuals and organizations and to implement citywide policy changes. Well-being has reached new highs according to the most recent Sharecare Community Well-Being Index (CWBI) and other community indicators.

Our community improved in four key well-being areas measured by the CWBI—community, social, purpose, and physical—and overall well-being improved by 3.7-points.

A broad coalition has supported Monterey County's efforts to adopt 196 policies and plans like Safe Routes to School, Double Up Food Bucks, and smoking-control ordinances that will guide future decision-making toward an even more vibrant and active future. This work was bolstered by \$ 133.3 million in grant funding secured with the support of Blue Zones Project.

The return on investment has and will continue to manifest. The semi-permanent and permanent changes already made compound over time, producing greater future returns for Monterey County. Return on investment can be measured in a myriad of ways, as the value captured is unique to each citizen, family, and organization. In this way, Monterey County has

been enriched as a “choice community”—a place where more people and businesses decide to be. Conservatively, the six-year estimated healthcare and workforce productivity savings for Monterey County from 2019 through 2025 totals \$392.7 million.

With sustained momentum, continued implementation of city policy and plans, and project advancement in key areas, Monterey County stands to further improve community well-being in its next phase of work.

More than seven years ago, when Blue Zones Project first engaged Monterey County leadership, we collectively established an ambitious plan for the entire county to become a certified Blue Zones Community—starting in Salinas. Today, Monterey County is a new benchmark for what bold leaders across the state and country can achieve when they invest in the health and well-being of their citizens. Congratulations for creating an even better Monterey County!



# THE BLUE ZONES PROJECT STORY

What do Ikaria, Greece; Loma Linda, California; Sardinia, Italy; Okinawa, Japan; and Nicoya, Costa Rica, have in common? Their citizens lead vibrant, healthy, and amazingly long lives. These places are known as blue zones longevity hot spots, where people live measurably longer, with lower incidences of chronic disease and a higher quality of life.



More than 86 percent<sup>1</sup> of the nearly \$3 trillion in annual U.S. healthcare costs are spent on chronic disease<sup>1</sup>. Yet much of this disease can be prevented and reduced in impact through lifestyle changes.

According to a long-term population study of Danish twins, 80 percent of a person's lifespan is determined by lifestyle choices, environmental factors, and access to care. Only 20 percent is genetic.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, in most places, our environment encourages unhealthy choices. Americans are bombarded daily with messages for unhealthy products and surrounded by modern "conveniences" that make us more sedentary and isolated.

## Discovering Blue Zones

In 2004, Dan Buettner teamed up with National Geographic, the National Institute on Aging, and the world's best longevity researchers to identify pockets around the world where people lived measurably better, longer. In the five original blue zones regions, they found that people reached age 100 at rates ten times greater than the U.S. average, with lower rates of chronic disease. These original blue zones areas are in vastly different parts of the world, from Sardinia, Italy and Ikaria, Greece to Okinawa, Japan, Costa Rica's Nicoya Peninsula, and stateside in Loma Linda, California. Studying the factors that influenced health and longevity in these places, researchers found that residents share nine specific traits. Dan Buettner captured these insights in his New York Times best-selling books, *The Blue Zones* and *The Blue Zones Solution*.



## BLUE ZONES POWER 9

The secrets to well-being and longevity are found in the Power 9®—nine common principles from the world’s blue zones longevity hot spots. They can be grouped into four categories. These principles are the basis for how Blue Zones Project impacts communities to make healthy choices easier:

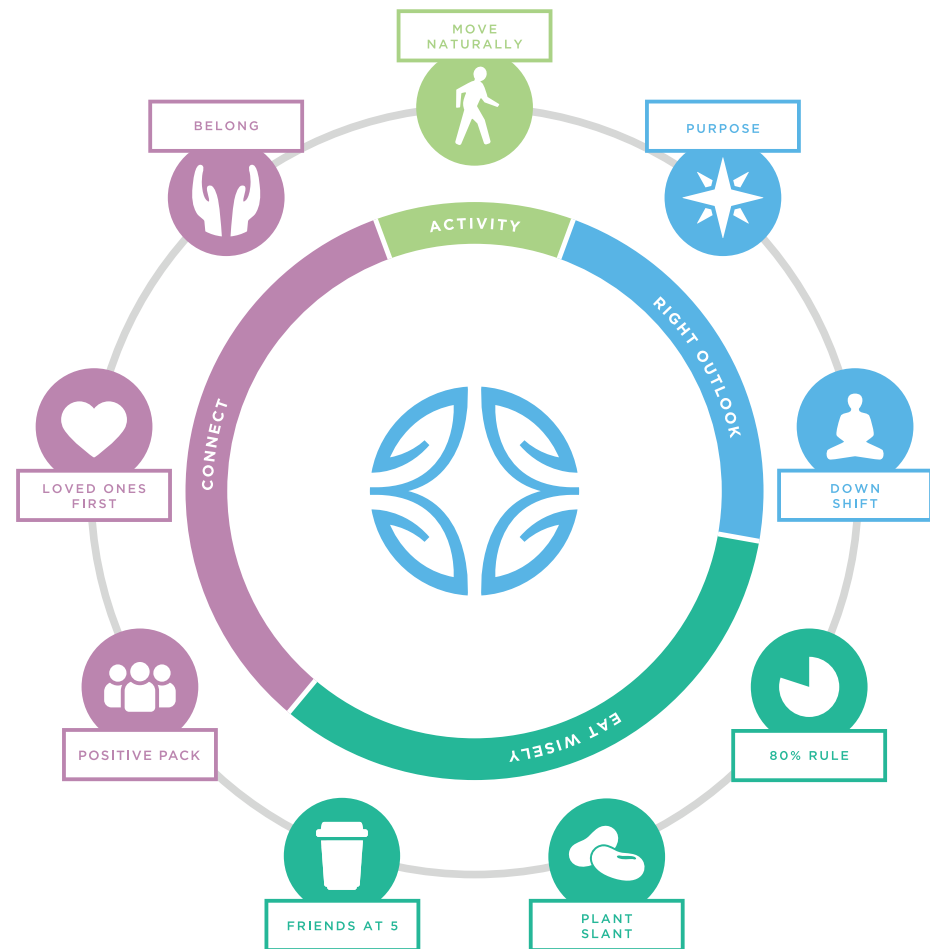
**Move Naturally.** Homes, communities, and workplaces are designed to nudge people into physical activity. Focus should be given to favorite activities, as individuals are more likely to practice them regularly. For example: gardening, walking, or biking to run errands, and playing with one’s family are great ways to incorporate natural movement into the day.

**Right Outlook.** Individuals know and can articulate their sense of purpose. They also take time to downshift, ensuring their day is punctuated with periods of calm.

**Eat Wisely.** In most cases, fad diets do not provide sustainable results. Individuals and families can use time-honored strategies for healthier eating habits, including:

- Using verbal reminders or smaller plates to eat less at meals
- Incorporating more plant-based options into your eating habits
- Enjoying coffee or a glass of wine with friends during regular social hours

**Connect.** Research indicates it is exceedingly important that people surround themselves with the “right” people—those who make them happy and support healthy behaviors. Put loved ones first by spending quality time with family and friends, and by participating in a faith-based community.



## BLUE ZONES PROJECT LIFE RADIUS

**Blue Zones Project takes a unique, systematic approach to improving well-being by focusing on our life radius.**

Blue Zones Project is based upon Dan Buettner's discoveries and additional well-being research. A community-led well-being improvement initiative, Blue Zones Project is designed to make healthy choices easier through permanent changes to a community's environment, policy, and social networks. More than 75 communities have joined the movement since the first pilot project in 2009. Monterey County is the first county-wide initiative in California to make the commitment to transform well-being with Blue Zones Project.

Because healthier environments naturally nudge people toward healthier choices, Blue Zones Project focuses on influencing the Life Radius®, the area close to home in which people spend the majority of their lives. Blue Zones Project best practices use policy, places, and people as levers to transform those surroundings. Our communities have populations with greater well-being, improved health outcomes, reduced costs, stronger resiliency, and increased civic pride, all of which support healthy economic development.





**SHARECARE COMMUNITY WELL-BEING INDEX**

**The world's most definitive measurement of well-being**

Based on over 4M surveys and over 600 elements of social determinants of health data, Sharecare's Community Well-Being Index serves as the definitive measure of community well-being across and within populations. Measuring well-being gives policy, community, and business leaders the data to benchmark populations, understand gaps and opportunities, and then prioritize interventions to measurably improve well-being. Improving well-being has been shown to lower health care costs and increase worker productivity, in turn, enhancing organizational and community competitiveness.



## Measuring the Impact

Change requires action. It isn't enough to do something one time; lasting change, which is a central tenet of Blue Zones Project, must be created from permanent and semi-permanent changes and alterations to the environment, policies, programs, and social networks. These actions allow healthy choices to become easy choices today and for many years to come.

When Blue Zones Project launched in Monterey County, the overall community well-being sat at 63.2 according to Sharecare Community Well-Being Index (CWBI) data, falling below state and national averages. Today, overall well-being in Monterey County is 66.9 a 3.7-point increase. This improvement highlights intentional efforts to improve the health of people who call Monterey County home.

## Well-Being on the Rise in Monterey County

	2019	2025	Point Change
Overall Well-Being Score	63.2	66.9	3.7 ↑
Community Well-Being	61.9	65.1	3.2 ↑
Social Well-Being	64.3	67.8	3.5 ↑
Purpose Well-Being	61.8	65.3	3.5 ↑
Physical Well-Being	62.1	69.0	6.9 ↑
Financial Well-Being	63.7	60.3	3.4 ↓





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IN COMMUNITIES WITH HIGHER WELL-BEING, WE HAVE FOUND THAT PEOPLE LIVE LONGER, HAPPIER LIVES AND BUSINESS AND LOCAL ECONOMIES FLOURISH. A RELIABLE WELL-BEING METRIC PROVIDES COMMUNITY AND BUSINESS LEADERS WITH THE DATA AND INSIGHTS THEY NEED TO HELP MAKE SUSTAINED TRANSFORMATION A REALITY. AFTER ALL, IF YOU CAN'T MEASURE IT, YOU CAN'T MANAGE IT.

Dan Buettner  
*New York Times* best-selling author  
National Geographic Fellow  
Blue Zones founder

# PUTTING WELL-BEING ON THE MAP IN MONTEREY COUNTY



**Pioneering the first county-wide initiative in California, Monterey County transforms well-being with Blue Zones Project.**

Monterey County is prioritizing the health of its neighbors and investing in policies and programs to improve health equity for those who need it most. Our neighbors, teachers, and community leaders have made tremendous strides in optimizing the places where we all live, work, learn, and play.

Monterey County is a community to be proud of, and our well-being transformation is just beginning.



WE ARE PROUD TO SUPPORT BLUE ZONES PROJECT MONTEREY COUNTY AND THE INCREDIBLE PROGRESS IT HAS MADE IN TRANSFORMING THE WELL-BEING OF RESIDENTS. THIS ACHIEVEMENT IS A TESTAMENT TO THE DEDICATION AND COLLABORATIVE SPIRIT OF OUR PARTNERS, RESIDENTS, AND LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS, ALL UNITED BY A COMMON GOAL: TO NURTURE THE HEALTH AND HAPPINESS OF EVERY MEMBER OF OUR COMMUNITY.

Dr. Steven Packer, President & CEO (retired), Montage Health

## A COMMUNITY IN ACTION

Local businesses, organizations, residents, and city leaders came together to make incremental changes that caused a ripple effect, improving well-being across the city and bringing individuals together to create lasting change.

**People of all ages and backgrounds participated in Blue Zones Project Monterey County: some 41,325 residents.** Many attended free cooking demonstrations and Purpose Workshops. Hundreds donated their time to volunteer opportunities and joined supportive Moais to connect and walk or connect and eat healthier in small groups. Many residents also supported Blue Zones Project planning and implementation by serving on committees.

A critical mass of places optimized their environments for healthy living. **More than 248 organizations participated in Blue Zones Project.** Worksites, schools, restaurants, grocery stores, faith-based organizations, and community groups made changes that produced new gardens, highlighted healthier foods, created safer walking routes, offered space to de-stress, and energized employees, members, and residents through purpose and new connections.



From a policy standpoint, Monterey County has enacted 196 policies and plans to create, support, and implement:

- A Safe Routes to School plan—adopted by Salinas, Gonzales, Soledad, Greenfield and King City Councils—which makes it safer and easier for students to walk, bike and roll to school.
- Adoption and enforcement of countywide tobacco control ordinances and ordinance updates.
- The SURF! Busway and Bus Rapid Transit Project, which will benefit residents through reduced commuter traffic, improved public transit access and zero emission buses.
- The Monterey County Food System Coalition, which serves to increase access to healthy food, procure locally grown food in institutional settings, and engage a school and community garden network.
- ParkRx Monterey County, a collaboration with city, community partners, public health advocates, medical providers & educators to support outdoor space access, safety improvement and beautification.



## THE WORLD IS WATCHING

Blue Zones Project Monterey County has attracted local and national recognition, with more than 1,532 media stories to date.

Blue Zones Project Monterey County has been heralded for innovative approaches to population health management in notable publications, including those noted below.

**GALLUP®**

MONTEREY COUNTY  
**WEEKLY**

BECKER'S  
**HOSPITAL REVIEW**

**San Francisco Chronicle**



*edible*  
MONTEREY BAY



King City Rustler



## BLUE ZONES PROJECT MONTEREY COUNTY IN THE NEWS

1,532+  
Total Mentions

3.7 Billion+  
Total Reach

\$9 Million  
Total Publicity Value\*

*\*Publicity value calculated using Cision  
Media Monitoring service.*





# POLICY

Blue Zones Project works with city leaders to implement evidence-based best practices to impact food policy, tobacco policy, and the built environment.

By improving community infrastructure and public policies, Blue Zones Project maximizes the ability of our community's residents to move naturally, connect socially, access healthy food, and improve quality of life.

## BUILT ENVIRONMENT

We generally exercise too hard or not at all. However, the world's longest-lived people don't pump iron, run marathons, or join gyms.

Instead, they live in environments that constantly nudge them into moving without thinking about it. They live in places where they can walk to the store, a friend's house, or places of worship. Their houses have stairs. They have gardens in their yards. It's not just about moving; it's about moving naturally.

### Why It Matters

About 69 percent of the American population can be classified as overweight or obese.<sup>3</sup> For the first time in history, our children's life expectancy is projected to be shorter than that of their parents. Obesity is not just a health problem, it's an economic one too. **The estimated annual health care costs of obesity-related illness are a staggering \$190 billion, or nearly 21 percent of annual medical**

**spending.** Childhood obesity alone is responsible for \$14 billion in direct medical costs.<sup>4</sup>

The good news is there is a solution for this growing issue. Increasing simple movements like standing, walking, stretching, and bending can help burn an extra 350 calories a day. **Studies show that just by making our communities more walkable, the prevalence of obesity can decrease by more than 10 percent.**<sup>5</sup>

That opens the door to even bigger wins, like lowered incidences of heart disease, diabetes, and respiratory issues. Equally important is the possibility for increased productivity, vitality, and years spent enjoying greater quality life.

Policies that support natural movement can shift the dynamics in any community toward physical activity. To this end, **Blue Zones Project Monterey County has completed 78 built environment initiatives across local policies, capacity building, demonstration projects, and infrastructure improvement.**



## Key Actions and Innovations

- Successfully launched a ParkRx website and map tool for Monterey County in both English and Spanish. ParkRx is a comprehensive system that uses technology to link healthcare providers and parks, creating a pathway for patients to use nature to improve their health and well-being. The resources were promoted to 65,000 households via Monterey Peninsula Regional Parks District's Let's Go Outdoors catalog. Moreover, they were integrated into the EPIC patient management system, ensuring that patients with a range of diagnoses are automatically referred to local parks and open spaces.
- Advocacy efforts helped secure approximately \$5.4 million in funding and grants for the King City Streetscape Project. This beautification and placemaking initiative focuses on Broadway Street in the historic neighborhood of Downtown King City.
- BZPMC's built environment experts provided input that prioritized pedestrian safety, biodiversity and people-centered design. The resultant gains in walkability, accessibility and aesthetics are expected to provide long-term benefits for residents, businesses, and visitors.
- Played an integral advocacy role in the transformative SURF! Busway and Bus Rapid Transit Project, which will benefit the County through reduced commuter traffic, better public transit access and zero emission buses.
- BZPMC supported regional agencies—including Monterey-Salinas Transit and the Transportation Agency for Monterey County— through capacity building and advocacy efforts. The latter included eight letters of support for grant applications, which helped secure over \$48 million in funding.



### GRANT FUNDING FOR COMPLETE STREETS

More than \$129.1 million in grant funding has been secured for built environment improvements in Monterey County. These awards are being invested in street and park beautification projects, road safety and accessibility improvements (including improved lighting, crosswalks, and other enhancements), and Safe Routes to School.

### IMPACT OF COMMUNITY DESIGN IMPROVEMENTS

City planners, organizations, and individuals across our community have come together to create environments and support policies that help people across Monterey County move naturally and safely. This work has helped contribute to a 9.8 percent increase in residents exercising at least 30 minutes a day, three days a week.

## A Gathering Place in Gonzales

In the small but mighty city of Gonzales, a community garden attests to the transformative power of cross-sectoral collaboration.

In late 2023, Blue Zones Project Monterey County (BZPMC) and the City came together to discuss the feasibility of turning a vacant lot into a place for locals to gather, grow, and learn.

BZPMC staff were instrumental in cultivating partnerships with community-based organizations, including **Wings of Knowledge**, the **Resource Conservation District (RCD) of Monterey County**, and **Save the Whales**. Each stakeholder had a role to play, contributing resources, time, labor, or expertise.

In line with best practices, partners sought to create a pollinator-friendly garden, complete with a fruit tree orchard and raised beds. Moreover, they aimed to develop a walking path, to encourage natural movement and make the area accessible to people with disabilities.

BZPMC provided funding to purchase three large garden beds and eight fruit trees, while RCD and the Public Works Department secured the help of a local young adult workforce. **Green Cadre** provided invaluable manual labor, building a walking path from decomposed granite.

The site's proximity to neighborhoods, schools, and a local skate park was a major drawing point. Because of its strong potential for connectivity to future walking and biking trails, it was identified as a strategic Marquee opportunity during BZPMC's discovery phase.

The Gonzales Community Garden was officially inaugurated on March 9, 2024, during a community workday. Local officials, residents, and partner organizations gathered to install soil, plant herbs and vegetables, remove weeds, and decorate the space with hand-painted rocks.

There have been several community garden workdays since then, as the green space continues to foster community engagement. Residents actively use it to enjoy outdoor activities and grow their own food. But beyond that, the garden

has become a place of learning. Save the Whales integrated the space into its outdoor learning curriculum with students from **La Gloria Elementary School**.

Save the Whales has functioned as the garden's lead steward for the past year, overseeing educational activities and maintenance. BZPMC will support efforts to identify a long-term garden leader from within the community and RCD will continue its support by creating and maintaining a pollinator garden and hosting in-person gardening workshops.

Through hard work, resourcefulness and imagination, partners have turned an empty plot of land into something. What was once a desolate space of untapped potential is now a beacon of healthy living, environmental education, and community engagement.



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THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE COMMUNITY GARDEN HAS BEEN INCREDIBLE TO SEE, FROM AN EMPTY CANVAS TO A GROWING AND THRIVING SHARED COMMUNITY SPACE. IT IS A TESTAMENT TO THE DEDICATION AND COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE CITY OF GONZALES, COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS, AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS.

Jessica Olmedo, Recreation Coordinator,  
City of Gonzales





## TOBACCO

City policies have a lasting, community-wide impact on shaping our environments to support well-being.

**Smoking-related illness in the United States costs more than \$300 billion each year, including nearly \$170 billion for direct medical care and more than \$156 billion in lost productivity.**<sup>10</sup> Comprehensive community policies can support well-being by limiting exposure to second-hand smoke and leading to lower overall use of tobacco and e-cigarettes.

California is known for having robust statewide tobacco policies, but local partners knew they could take additional steps to help reduce tobacco use rates.



During the Blue Zones Project discovery phase, Monterey County was found to be well prepared to engage in activities related to tobacco prevention and control. Its long history of commitment to these efforts was complimented by a deep bench of leadership from the public and private sectors, who had consistently supported successful initiatives in a wide range of public health and health promotion efforts.

This created strong confidence that the county had the right mix of people, resources, and passion to successfully implement tobacco prevention and control policy-based initiatives.

Blue Zones Project Monterey County (BZPMC) has worked alongside public health leaders, city officials, youth advocates, and community organizations to advance science-based tobacco-control policies aimed at reducing commercial tobacco use and protecting public health.

Key collaborators at the County level include **Monterey County Health Department** and **Sun Street Centers**, who partnered with BZPMC to support clean-up events, advocacy campaigns, youth engagement and local policy updates.

In total, **29 tobacco policy initiatives were completed** across the areas of policy advancement and alignment, capacity building and county-level contributions.



### BY THE NUMBERS

According to CWBI data, the rates of tobacco use in Monterey County dropped to 3.8 percent in 2025, well below state and national averages of 12.5 and 15.3 percent respectively.

## Key Actions and Innovations

- In 2022, the Monterey County Board of Supervisors amended the county's Tobacco Retail License (TRL) ordinance to include a ban on flavored tobacco and single-use e-cigarettes. BZPMC also supported the city of Soledad in its efforts to adopt a matching ordinance.
- BZPMC collaborated with **City Council Member, Brian McCarthy**, and **Community Development Director, Guido Persicone**, to advance two critical tobacco ordinances in the City of Marina.
- The Comprehensive TRL strengthened tobacco sales regulations to prevent youth access and the Smoke-Free Outdoor Spaces Ordinance expanded protections for community members in public parks and open spaces. Del Rey Oaks followed with similar ordinances in 2024.
- Together, BZPMC and Sun Street Centers' STEPS youth hosted eight tobacco litter cleanups, while 40 classrooms, schools, and youth groups across Monterey County pledged to remain vape- and tobacco-free.
- Beyond addressing public health concerns, these initiatives empower youth to advocate for tobacco-free policies in their communities while feeding into broader policy work.
- In Soledad, Sun Street Centers supported students' efforts to engage the City Council during its TRL ordinance review. They provided public comments,

advocated for updated policies to include flavored tobacco restrictions, and encouraged council members to commit to a tobacco-free future. This culminated in stronger policies against flavored tobacco.

- In Gonzales and King City, BZPMC partnered with City officials, Sun Street Centers, and youth leaders to promote tobacco awareness and prevention.
- Gonzales City Council approved an update to the city's flavored tobacco TRL and may consider a smoke-free multi-unit housing ordinance, while King City focuses on retailer education and enforcement through Department of Justice funding.
- BZPMC's Policy Lead served as co-chair of the Monterey County Collaborates Coalition; this integration solidifies BZPMC's leadership role in regional tobacco-control efforts.



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AS A CITY COUNCIL,  
WE WERE SO  
IMPRESSED WITH  
THE STUDENTS'  
COMMENTS  
AND THEIR  
PARTICIPATION  
IN THE POLICY  
PROCESS. IT  
REINFORCED THE  
IMPORTANCE OF  
OUR DECISION.

Anna Velazquez, Mayor, City of Soledad



## A United Approach to Tobacco Control

Since mid-2023, Blue Zones Project Monterey County (BZPMC) and the **Monterey County Health Department (MCHD)** have supported **Del Rey Oaks (DRO) City Council Members Kim Shirley** and **Jeremy Hallock** in advancing key tobacco control ordinances.

These include a comprehensive Tobacco Retail License (TRL), a smoke-free outdoor spaces ordinance, and a smoke-free multi-unit housing ordinance for triplexes and above.

These measures facilitate community health and well-being by reducing tobacco product access, weakening the industry's influence on the retail market, and protecting vulnerable (and often voiceless) people from exposure to secondhand smoke and aerosols.

Blue Zones Project Monterey County played a key role in the policy development and adoption process. In partnership with the MCHD, BZPMC

supported the process of drafting TRL and smoke-free ordinances modeled after recent progress in the city of Marina.

Indeed, most major cities in Monterey County have already adopted TRLs, making DRO among the last to implement this critical public health measure.

Considering the City's proximity to other Peninsula communities, and the housing and retail growth anticipated for this area, these policy actions are a timely measure that creates a more unified approach to tobacco control in the region.

The first readings of the TRL and outdoor smoking ordinances were passed unanimously on December 19, 2023, with second readings and ratifications on January 23, 2024. Blue Zones Project Monterey County helped organize public comments and letters of support for council consideration, amplifying young voices by including youth leaders from Sun Street Centers.

Blue Zones Project Monterey County also advocated for adoption during both public hearings for the multi-unit housing

ordinance. Residents from DRO's primary multi-unit complex also spoke in support. The first and second readings passed unanimously on February 27, 2024 and March 26, 2024.

The BZPMC team continues to work with City staff and the MCHD to create educational outreach strategies and develop updated signage for city parks and multi-unit housing properties.



## FOOD

Food policy has the power to improve the availability of produce across neighborhoods.

A 2011 analysis of U.S. Census data by the Center for Social Inclusion reveals Latino, Native American, and African American communities are two to four times more likely than Whites to lack access to healthy foods.<sup>11</sup> Collaborative, community-based policies can foster a healthier local food system, improving access and making produce more visible via schools, corner markets, farmers markets, neighborhood gardens, mobile businesses, and more.

**If current eating and exercise habits persist, it is estimated that 86 percent of the American population will be overweight or obese by 2030.**<sup>12</sup>

Plate sizes are growing (from 9.5 inches in 1900 to 12.5 inches today) and so are our appetites. We're eating 27 percent more than we used to.

Food is fuel, and what we eat impacts our productivity. A 2012 study revealed that unhealthy eating is related to a 66 percent increase in the risk of lost productivity. Health-related employee-productivity loss accounts for 77 percent of all productivity loss and costs employers up to three times more in annual healthcare expenses.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond looking and feeling better, healthier eating creates material benefits: an estimated \$114.5 billion per year (in 2012 dollars) in medical savings, increased productivity, and reductions in heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, and osteoporotic hip fractures.<sup>14</sup> Poor diet is a major risk factor for these five health conditions, all of which reduce life expectancy.

Blue Zones Project focuses on shaping food policy to increase consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables, in part ensuring access for all residents. To address the issue, **89 new food policies and plans** have been adopted so far to improve the food environment for individuals and businesses in Monterey County.



## Key Actions and Innovations

- Secured a **\$200,000 grant from Central California Alliance for Health** to help **North County Recreation and Park District (NCRPD)** transform its Thursday night market into a certified farmers' market. The **Castroville market has already served over 200 households, and the launch of its 1:2 nutrition incentive program boosted produce sales by 300 percent**—bringing health and economic benefits to this low-income community.
- Instrumental in relaunching the certified farmers' market in Seaside, in partnership with the City and **Everyone's Harvest**. The market hosts over 25 produce and prepared food vendors, creating a sustainable and equitable access point for healthy local food.
- Collaborated with countywide partners to create a comprehensive guide that outlines current policies,

programs, and initiatives which support nutrition security, local resilience, and economic opportunities for small and mid-scale farmers. The guide and resources were distributed to nearly 50 elected officials across all Monterey County cities and Board of Supervisors.

- Used presence in schools and community gardens to develop a countywide school and community garden network that fosters sustainable garden spaces and strengthens community food systems.
- With help from partners like **Communities for Sustainable Monterey County** and the **Monterey County Resource Conservation District**, the **Monterey County Garden Network** was formally incorporated into the Food System Coalition in 2024.

**Efforts like these to increase healthy food access and education helped contribute to a 42 percent decrease in high cholesterol rates among adults, which now sit at 11.2 percent in Monterey County after a six-year period.**



### BY THE NUMBERS

Since 2019, Blue Zones Project Monterey County has secured nearly \$3 million to develop and implement countywide nutrition incentive and food security programs. These efforts have significantly expanded access to fresh, locally grown produce, benefiting over 4,500 families monthly, while supporting the regional agriculture economy.

## Promoting Food Security in Monterey County

According to the 2022 Monterey County Community Health Needs Assessment, 40.8 percent of residents are deemed “food insecure,” having run out of food in the past year and/or been worried about doing so. Unsurprisingly, food insecurity is highest among low and very low-income residents, at 65.6 and 76.1 percent, respectively.

For economically disadvantaged individuals and families, affordability is often the access barrier to fresh, nutritious foods. It is this issue that the **California Alliance for Family Farmers (CAFF)** sought to address. In 2023, **CAFF and key partner organizations launched Farms Together, powered by an \$85 million grant from the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program.**

Farms Together facilitates the delivery of fresh, local food to community sites and food banks via farm boxes and bulk pallets. Moreover, the produce is sourced from small, mid-scale, and Black,

Indigenous, and People Of Color (BIPOC) farmers. In this way, the groundbreaking initiative leverages collaborations between food hubs, aggregation partners and producers to help food-insecure households across California.

Noting the project’s potential, Blue Zones Project Monterey County (BZPMC) connected CAFF with two local organizations that could support the mission. **Savor the Local** and **Everyone’s Harvest** help to aggregate and distribute produce. With their assistance, Farms Together is strengthening California’s agricultural supply chain while expanding opportunities for socioeconomically disadvantaged farmers.

Between April 2024 and May 2025, Everyone’s Harvest purchased \$386,592.50 in produce from 15 BIPOC growers, distributing 14,485 boxes to low-income households at its Seaside farmers’ market and at the site of its Alisal farmers’ market at the **California Women, Infants and Children** (WIC) office in East Salinas. The program began in Seaside, distributing 285 boxes weekly between April and October 2024, and expanded to East Salinas in November 2024—splitting

the total weekly distribution of 285 boxes across Seaside and East Salinas between November 2024 and May 2025.

In October 2024, Savor the Local launched distribution in Gonzales, delivering 218 boxes weekly at a public city park and the **Taylor Farms Family Health and Wellness Center**. Between October 2024 and July 2025, Savor the Local has purchased \$282,528 from about 22 small family farmers and BIPOC growers. As of July 2025, approximately 8,000 boxes have been distributed to Gonzales families in need.

By investing in farmers, empowering community organizations, and providing fresh, healthy food to residents, Farms Together demonstrates the transformative potential of a community-centered, resilient food system.

## Key Actions and Innovations

- Facilitated innovative partnerships between CAFF and key local organizations, Savor the Local and Everyone’s Harvest. In April 2024, Everyone’s Harvest received \$240,000

## POLICY: FOOD

for a six-month contract that was later extended end of 2025.

- Following an introduction by BZPMC, Savor the Local partnered with Taylor Farms Family Health and Wellness Center and the **City of Gonzales** to implement the program in South Monterey County, where the 2022 Monterey County Community Health Needs Assessment measured food insecurity at a whopping 51.5 percent.
- Fostered collaboration by convening organizations, providing marketing support, promoting the program, and meeting workforce needs on distribution days. To date, BZPMC volunteers and staff have dedicated over 70 hours to packaging produce boxes.
- As of March 2025, nearly \$783,000 has been invested in Monterey County to support a resilient food system. BZPMC continues to support Farms Together and its partners through coordination, program promotion, and strategic collaboration. Monterey County.



### BY THE NUMBERS

Through Farms Together, nearly 500 families in Seaside, Salinas, and Gonzales are receiving free weekly produce boxes—directly affecting food insecurity.



## Monterey County Doubles Up

For many families in Monterey County, cost is a deterrent to purchasing and consuming healthy food. According to the most recent Community Health Needs Assessment, 40% of adults in the County struggle to access the food they need, and one-third of the community finds it either somewhat or very difficult to afford fresh produce.

Since its 2019 launch, Blue Zones Project Monterey County (BZPMC) has worked to address food insecurity in the region. In partnership with Aspire Health, BZPMC identified an opportunity to bring Double Up Food Bucks (DUFB) to the community.

DUFB is a nationally recognized nutrition incentive program that matches fruit and vegetable purchases dollar for dollar. More specifically, it matches CalFresh/SNAP dollars, allowing shoppers with EBT cards to receive a 50% discount on California-grown produce.

In this way, a qualifying purchase of \$30 would only cost the buyer \$15. In

California, and over 20 other states, DUFB is a safety net for economically disadvantaged families. Moreover, it promotes behavior change by circumventing an issue that stands as a barrier to healthy eating.

Today, DUFB is available at seven Monterey County locations: five **La Princesa** grocery stores, one **El Rey Fresh Produce** store and **El Pueblo Market**. Significantly, these establishments are in zip codes with some of the County's highest food insecurity rates.

## Key Actions and Innovations

- Secured Major Grant Funding: BZPMC and **Aspire Health** collaboratively developed a successful grant application for the California Nutrition Incentive Program, administered by the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA). The effort secured over \$1 million in funding, including more than \$600,000 specifically for nutrition incentives. More funding CDFA will be awarded in 2026-27 (pending \$ amount based on USDA funding).

- In partnership with **Fullwell** (formerly SPUR), a Bay Area leader in nutrition incentive implementation, BZPMC brought critical technical expertise to support the local launch and expansion of the program in Monterey County, while cultivating strong partnerships with organizations including **Clinica de Salud, Cadre, Salinas Valley Health's Summer Health Institute, Alisal Union School District**, and others.
- As of June 2025, over 110,000 DUFB transactions have been completed, with more than \$330,000 in food incentives redeemed. The program is offered in four stores in Salinas and three stores in South County. Promotional efforts also boosted the DUFB discount from 50% to 75%, driving greater affordability and engagement.
- An average of 4,500 unique households now use DUFB each month, reflecting strong and consistent community participation.
- BZPMC actively advocated for state-level policies to institutionalize DUFB-style programs in the California



State Budget. As a result, **\$36 million was allocated in the 2025–26 budget to strengthen the CalFresh Fruit and Vegetable EBT Program**—a major win in a challenging fiscal year.

These collective efforts are transforming access to healthy food in Monterey County—making fresh, local produce more affordable for thousands of families. As participation grows and state-level support strengthens, Double Up Food Bucks is not just a discount program; it’s a powerful tool for advancing food equity and long-term well-being across the region.

THESE PROGRAMS WORK. IF WE WANT TO HAVE A LARGER IMPACT ON HUNGER AND HEALTH AND CALIFORNIA FARMERS, WE SHOULD MEET THE NEED TO MAKE THESE PROGRAMS MUCH, MUCH BIGGER.

Eli Zigas, Executive Director, Fullwell

BLUE ZONES P

# PLACES

In Monterey County, a critical mass of worksites, schools, restaurants, and grocery stores have optimized their environments for healthy living.

By working together to make permanent or semi-permanent changes, healthy choices have become the easy choices in all the places we live, work, learn, and play.



## WORKSITES

Worksites engage employees and support healthy choices.

Employers are in a powerful position to help us move more, eat better, and connect. About one-third of our waking hours are spent at work. Fewer jobs require moderate physical activity, a percentage that has fallen from 50 percent in 1960 to 20 percent today.<sup>16</sup> Some 70 percent of Americans eat at their desk several times a week.<sup>17</sup> As waistlines expand, so do medical costs for employers. Creating healthier work environments can shift that trend, trimming costs and enhancing productivity.

**Our community saw 70 worksites take actions to support employees, from providing healthy snacks and produce to creating on-site walking paths and downshift rooms to become Blue Zones Project Approved™.**



## Impact of Healthier Workplaces

- **Braga Fresh** implemented a range of well-being best practices across its three Monterey County locations. Highlights include installing an on-site bike rack, creating a staff garden, installing a healthy vending machine, and regularly giving employees fresh produce to take home.
- Multiple sites made strategic efforts to seamlessly integrate natural movement into the workday. **Hartnell College Soledad Education Center** and others created designated Blue Zones parking spots that encourage employees to walk further, while **Marina Coast Water District** installed under-desk foot peddlers to help staff stay active while working.
- Multiple entities created mapped walking routes between their worksites; **Monterey Fuel Company** complemented its efforts by using a step challenge to drive engagement.

- **Central Coast Visiting Nurses Association & Hospice** supported the mental and emotional wellness of its staff by creating an outdoor downshift space to encourage relaxation and minimize stress.
- Other companies empowered staff to take active breaks and resist sedentary behavior. **Taylor Farms Family Health & Wellness Center** implemented hourly movement breaks and equipped a quarter of their meeting rooms and workstations with sit-stand furniture.



### BY THE NUMBERS

Over 14,000 employees at Blue Zones Project Approved™ worksites have taken part in Blue Zones Project activities, signaling strong momentum for well-being in the workplace

## Monterey Peninsula College Puts Health First

**Monterey Peninsula College (MPC)** takes well-being seriously, and its Student Health Services (SHS) department sees to it. The SHS is the engine that keeps the institution running: using integrative healthcare to help students pursue their goals while preserving themselves in the process.

The SHS team is comprised of people who place high value on well-being: an on-site registered nurse, health specialists, licensed therapists, and social work students from Cal State Monterey Bay. Their ideological alignment with Blue Zones principles laid the foundation for a fruitful partnership.

MPC's **LeAnn Contapay**, a public health nurse, hoped to bring Blue Zones principles to her work environment several years ago. Her efforts were stalled by challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, but she regrouped in 2022 with renewed focus on holistic well-being.

In collaboration with SHS and **Cal State University Monterey Bay (CSUMB)**

interns, MPC made major strides toward Blue Zones Project (BZP) Participating Organization status.

The college mapped campus walking trails, hosted wellness and mindfulness events, facilitated purpose workshops, and strengthened its partnerships with the **Community Hospital of Monterey Peninsula** and CSUMB.

As a result of this collaborative work, SHS became a BZP Participating Organization in June 2022. Notably, MPC reached another milestone in 2023, when campus eatery, **Peninsula Café**, became a Blue Zones Approved™ restaurant.

Simultaneously, MPC inched closer to worksite approval by implementing a range of wellness initiatives. The institution encouraged walking meetings and the use of RealAge Test resources, promoted healthy dietary options during gatherings, and added ergonomic assessments, walking routes and CSA (Community-Supported Agriculture) flyers to employee onboarding materials.

Through these efforts and more, MPC worked to integrate well-being practices into the daily lives of students and

staff. This diligence and dedication was rewarded with a Blue Zones Approved™ worksite designation in 2024.

## Key Actions and Innovations

- Hosted a “Taste of Blue Zones” event to celebrate Peninsula Café’s restaurant approval that featured cooking demonstrations, wellness activities, and connection opportunities—reinforcing MPC’s commitment to promoting healthier lifestyles through Power 9 principles.
- Installed and maintained walking trail signage, enhancing opportunities for natural movement.
- Presented worksite approval and achievements to the Governing Board of Trustees and Executive Leadership Team.

Monterey Peninsula College’s journey reflects a deep, campus-wide commitment to well-being. By embedding Blue Zones principles into everyday experiences, MPC is creating a healthier, more connected environment where students and staff can thrive.

”

AS A PUBLIC HEALTH NURSE, I SAW HOW DEEPLY THE PANDEMIC AFFECTED OUR CAMPUS COMMUNITY, AND I FELT A STRONG RESPONSIBILITY TO BRING SOMETHING POSITIVE AND HEALING TO OUR LIVES. WORKING TOWARDS THE BLUE ZONES PROJECT APPROVAL WAS MY WAY OF ENSURING THAT WE CREATE A HEALTHIER, HAPPIER, AND MORE CONNECTED ENVIRONMENT WHERE EVERYONE CAN FEEL SUPPORTED AND THRIVE.

Leann Contapay, Public Health Nurse,  
Monterey Peninsula College



## Valley Farm Management Cultivates More than Grapes

What began in 1973 as a small vineyard nestled in Monterey County's Santa Lucia Highlands has grown into one of the region's most respected vineyard management companies. Today, **Valley Farm Management (VFM)** oversees more than 3,000 acres of premium winegrapes, combining agricultural expertise with a deep commitment to quality, sustainability, and people. Known for delivering high-quality, sustainably grown grapes to renowned wineries around the world, VFM has built a legacy rooted in excellence—and, more recently, in well-being.

At the heart of this evolution is a deep recognition: a healthy vineyard depends on healthy people. VFM began investing in its workforce's health by offering annual biometric screenings to detect potential risks early and support long-term well-being. A bilingual diabetes and nutrition program followed, expanding access to critical health education across its employee base. Over time, VFM shaped

a culture of wellness from the ground up, even designing a custom well-being logo to rally the team around this growing priority.

In 2022, VFM strengthened its wellness journey by partnering with Blue Zones Project Monterey County (BZPMC). Through this collaboration, the company launched new ways to support employees and extend its impact to the broader South County community. One standout example: Family Fitness Days, a summertime series of monthly gatherings that include health screenings, healthy meals, and shared activities designed to build connection and prioritize well-being. These events embody Blue Zones principles—natural movement, family first, connection, and purpose—while offering employees meaningful moments to recharge and reconnect.

What began as internal programming soon sparked a movement. In 2023, VFM teamed up with **CRŪ Winery** and BZPMC to launch the Hike & Wine Series, blending scenic outdoor hikes with local wine tasting. Initially an employee well-being initiative, the series quickly caught on with the community and has grown into a

signature event in Soledad. The monthly hikes now draw up to 60 people at a time and returned for another eight-part series in 2025.

These efforts are making a measurable difference. Well-being program participation is on the rise, healthcare claims are down, and the culture at Valley Farm Management continues to evolve—centering care, connection, and community.

## Key Actions and Innovations

- Provided annual biometric screenings and launched a bilingual diabetes and nutrition education program to support employee health.
- Hosted an Annual Fun Run and monthly Family Fitness Days to foster connection through natural movement and shared meals.
- Created a custom well-being program logo to reinforce a consistent culture of wellness.
- Co-created the community-favorite Hike & Wine Series with CRŪ Winery

PLACES: WORKSITES

and BZPMC, expanding access to nature, connection, and local culture.

Looking ahead, VFM is committed to deepening this work. The company plans to hold quarterly check-ins to assess and refine its initiatives, empower employee-led wellness committees, and continue supporting popular programs like the Hike & Wine Series. By aligning their everyday operations with the principles of community, movement, and nourishment, Valley Farm Management is proving that when you care for people as much as you care for the land, everyone thrives.



AS A FAMILY-OWNED AND OPERATED COMPANY, VALLEY FARM MANAGEMENT HAS ALWAYS TAKEN THE TIME TO TREAT OUR EMPLOYEES AS FAMILY. WE WANT THE BEST FOR THEM BECAUSE IF THEY ARE HAPPY AND HEALTHY, THEY WILL LIVE A MORE QUALITATIVE LIFE INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF THE WORKFORCE. BY INTRODUCING AND PRACTICING THE POWER 9 WITH THEM, WE CAN HELP THEM ENJOY THEIR WORKDAYS AND THE PEOPLE THEY WORK WITH, CREATING A BETTER WORK ENVIRONMENT AND ENCOURAGING THEM TO DO THE SAME AT HOME.

Kacy Smith, Health and Wellness Coordinator, Valley Farm Management





## SCHOOLS

Local schools create foundations for lifelong well-being.

Schools can shape healthy habits for life. Over the past 40 years, rates of obesity among children have soared. **Approximately 25 million children and adolescents (more than 33 percent) are now overweight or obese, or at the risk of becoming so.**<sup>19</sup> Physical activity and stretch breaks during the school day can improve grades, increase concentration, and raise math, reading, and writing test scores.<sup>20</sup> Simple changes in lunchroom design can nudge students toward healthier choices.<sup>21</sup>

**In Monterey County, 64 schools across 14 districts earned a Blue Zones Project Approved™ designation.** Of note, every school in the following districts achieved Blue Zones Project approval: **Gonzales USD, Greenfield USD, North Monterey County USD, Soledad USD,** and **Washington USD.**

Schools implemented policies and introduced food options that encourage healthy eating on campus, integrated physical activity into the day, and incorporated other Blue Zones Project principles into the curriculum and campus space.

## Impact of Healthier Schools

- **Mary Chapa Academy** supported district objectives for student wellness by providing a healthy lunch menu that features scratch-cooked meals 2–3 times per week. Moreover, the school saw an over 800 percent participation increase in diabetes prevention education modules—going from 24 to 237 students in the past year.
- **César Chávez Elementary** partnered with **Catholic Charities** to start a school garden program that incorporates outdoor learning, cooking demonstrations and nutritional education. Its Harvest of the Month curriculum introduces students to new fruits and vegetables through interactive lessons and taste tests.
- At **La Gloria Elementary** and **Los Arboles Middle School**, student well-being is strengthened through mindfulness programs. La Gloria’s Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports program bolsters self-awareness, confidence, self-regulation, and resilience. Los Arboles partners with Ohana to provide a range of activities, including surfing and equine therapy.



### WALKING HELPS KIDS

Children who walk to school are more alert and ready to learn, strengthen their social networks, and develop lifelong fitness habits. A Walking School Bus allows a group of children to walk to school under the supervision of an adult.<sup>22, 23</sup>

### MONTEREY COUNTY STUDENTS ON THE MOVE

Fourteen schools participated in a range of movement initiatives, from Walking School Buses and step challenges to Walking Moais and Zumba Moais.

## PLACES: SCHOOLS

- **Bay View Academy Lower Campus** sustained its Walking School Bus monthly walks for 3 consecutive school years, from 2022-2024. Chronic absenteeism decreased 5.9 percent between 2023 and 2024.
- Since gaining BZP approval, **Ione Olson Elementary** has seen a 22.4 percent decrease in chronic absenteeism.
- **North Monterey County High School** has gone to great lengths to make healthy choices easier, bringing a salad bar to the cafeteria, adding healthy options to vending machines, and prohibiting the sale of sugar-sweetened beverages on campus. The school's scratch-cooking program has increased the use of minimally processed ingredients by an average of 21 percent over the past two years.
- **Marina High School** held student-led BZPMC cooking demonstrations in both 2024 and 2025, attracting over 140 adult and student attendees. Pupils used BZP food guidelines to create inspired meals and incorporated produce from the school garden.



## Schools Beat Back Diabetes

Early in the Monterey County Blue Zones Project implementation, addressing diabetes and prediabetes rates among adults and youth was identified as a priority focus area. **Aspire Health**, co-owned by **Salinas Valley Health** and **Montage Health**, sought to bring diabetes education to students, teachers, and workplaces across the County.

That mission birthed the Don't Feed the Beast Type 2 Diabetes Campaign: an innovative approach that serves to lower local children's risk for this chronic illness.

With help from Blue Zones Project Monterey County (BZPMC), the **Healthy Youth Task Force**, and the **Monterey County Office of Education (MCOE)**, this strategic effort targets three focal areas: education, advocacy, and community engagement.

Schools are equipped with Aspire Health's diabetes education modules, which promote healthy eating, physical activity,

and reduced consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages.

Various efforts were made to secure community buy-in. Supplemental cafeteria posters and family resources reinforced positive health messaging, while incentives fostered engagement.

Aspire Health provided \$50 gift cards for the first 100 teachers to implement the modules and swag for all participating students. Schools also stood the chance to win two grand prizes by random selection, a Healthy Youth Field Day and \$1,500 to spend on water refill stations, PE equipment, or garden supplies.

At **Dual Language Academy** in Seaside, the prize money enabled a teacher to start a garden club and maintain the garden throughout the year.

**As of 2025, the diabetes education modules are used by 3,231 students and 137 teachers across 33 Monterey County schools.** Teachers and principals praise this resource for sparking meaningful, engaging discussions about prevention.



## Key Actions and Innovations

- Advocated for modules to be integrated into class curricula for the long-term, empowering teachers to deliver lessons independently.
- Achieved significant school engagement, especially in **Greenfield Union School District**, where leadership implemented a district-wide initiative.
- Used one-on-one meetings and school site presentations to champion diabetes education during National Diabetes Awareness Month.
- Engaged major employers to launch the Worksite Know Your Risk for Type 2 Diabetes Campaign and deliver impactful information to thousands of employees.
- Partnered with MCOE and other organizations to reach a broader audience and provide consistent messaging across the community.



### BY THE NUMBERS

The number of Monterey County residents reporting to be somewhat or very knowledgeable of prediabetes and diabetes prevention programs has increased by 13.2 percent since 2021.

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THROUGH INTERACTIVE DISCUSSIONS, ENGAGING ACTIVITIES, AND PRACTICAL DEMONSTRATIONS, MY STUDENTS GAINED A COMPREHENSIVE UNDERSTANDING OF THE CORRELATION BETWEEN DIET, EXERCISE, AND DIABETES PREVENTION...THEY NOT ONLY ABSORBED THE INFORMATION BUT ALSO ACTIVELY DISCUSSED WAYS TO IMPLEMENT HEALTHIER HABITS, INSPIRING EACH OTHER TO MAKE POSITIVE CHANGES IN THEIR ROUTINES.

Teacher who completed the Type 2 Diabetes Education



## Fairview Middle School Plants the Seeds of Well-Being

In the heart of Gonzales, **Fairview Middle School** is proving that well-being and academic success go hand in hand. Serving over 400 students—many of whom are English learners or come from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds—Fairview is focused on creating a school culture where every student is seen, supported, and inspired to thrive.

Grounded in a vision of whole-child development, the school has prioritized strong relationships, 21st-century learning, and a positive climate on campus. That vision expanded in recent years through its partnership with Blue Zones Project Monterey County (BZPMC), which helped the school weave well-being practices into daily routines and long-term planning.

What makes Fairview stand out is its commitment to going beyond academics to meet the needs of its students—body, mind, and spirit. Wellness-focused physical education now includes activities designed for lifelong movement, and a mindfulness

program helps students manage stress, build focus, and develop emotional resilience. In a bold move toward healthier habits, Fairview also prohibited soda and sugar-sweetened beverages on campus—including those brought from home—sending a powerful message about the value of nourishing both body and brain.

Outdoors, a flourishing school garden offers a space for hands-on learning and reflection. But Fairview didn't stop there. With support from BZPMC and in collaboration with local nonprofit Olinga, the school created a robust outdoor learning initiative rooted in the region's agricultural heritage. Through the program, students tackle real-world challenges in sustainability, food systems, and environmental science. Whether analyzing irrigation data, experimenting with crop yields, or designing solutions for local gardens, students are connecting STEM skills with the world around them—and seeing the impact of their work on their own community.

The results are real. Chronic absenteeism has dropped by nearly 5%, and students are actively engaged in experiential learning that sparks both curiosity and

confidence. Fairview is not only fostering future scientists, farmers, and engineers—it's cultivating young people who know how to care for themselves, their community, and the planet.



## Key Actions and Innovations

- Prohibited soda and sugar-sweetened beverages on campus, including from home.
- Integrated mindfulness practices and lifestyle wellness into school routines.
- Developed a thriving school garden to teach nutrition and environmental responsibility.
- Partnered with Olinga and BZPMC on outdoor learning that merges STEM with community impact.

Looking ahead, Fairview is continuing to grow its Wings of Knowledge program—an enrichment initiative that connects students with local farmers and industry professionals to explore agricultural technology and sustainability. With continued support from BZPMC and the broader Gonzales community, Fairview Middle School is modeling what's possible when schools invest in student well-being as a pathway to brighter, healthier futures.

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THE WINGS OF KNOWLEDGE PROGRAM HAS GONZALES HIGH AND FAIRVIEW MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS WORKING WITH RANCHES AND GROWERS PRIMARILY IN MONTEREY COUNTY. RIGHT NOW, THE MISSION IS TO DESIGN AND MANUFACTURE SOIL SENSOR PROBES THAT CAPTURE VITAL FIELD DATA, CARRY OUT SOFTWARE-BASED ANALYSIS, AND PROVIDE INSIGHTS TO GROWERS TO IMPROVE WATER USAGE.

Vahid Motazedian, STEM Coordinator, Gonzales Unified School District



## RESTAURANTS

Restaurant meals can weigh us down or lift us up.

Without accounting for an appetizer or dessert the typical American entree weighs in at 1,000 calories.<sup>24</sup> For the average adult, eating out just once a week roughly translates to a two pound weight gain per year. Yet evidence indicates that people appreciate healthy changes. In a five-year study of sales at U.S. restaurant chains, those that increased their better-for-you/low-calorie servings saw a 5.5 percent increase in same-store sales, while those that did not suffered a 5.5 percent decrease.<sup>25</sup>

With nearly one half of every food dollar spent on meals prepared outside the home, it's important that restaurants make healthy choices easier for customers by offering healthy entrees.

**Residents and visitors of Monterey County now have 62 Blue Zones Project Approved™ restaurants to choose from, and 314 Blue Zones-inspired dishes to enjoy.**

In these restaurants, patrons may find smaller portion and split-plate options, healthier

offerings highlighted through signage and staff-customer interactions, expanded use of local produce, and more.

Within the **Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula**, the **Fountain Court Café** is a staple among patients, visitors and staff. They now have their choice of 12 Blue Zones-Inspired dishes for kids and adults. At one year post-approval, the café was selling 152 of these meals per week; in year two, this rose to 193—amounting to about 10,000 healthy meals served.

Restaurants like **Aki Fresh Mex** and **Mezzaluna Pasteria & Mozzarella Bar** have also seen year-over-year increase in sales revenue generated by Blue Zones-inspired meals.

Multiple establishments, including **Luigi's**, **La Plaza Bakery**, and **Hestia**, showed their commitment to well-being through community engagement. By participating in BZPMC Community Kickoffs and bringing nutritious foods to local events, they alerted people to healthier options available in their locales and helped them build community around healthy eating.



”

I CHOSE TO WORK WITH BLUE ZONES PROJECT MONTEREY COUNTY BECAUSE OF ITS STRAIGHTFORWARD APPROACH WHEN IT COMES TO IMPROVING THE HEALTHINESS OF THE FOOD WE CONSUME. THERE'S A BIG MYTH THAT MOST, IF NOT ALL, MEXICAN FOOD IS UNHEALTHY; THIS COULDN'T BE FURTHER FROM THE TRUTH. NOT ONLY DOES OUR AWESOME PARTNERSHIP RAISE AWARENESS FOR HEALTHY EATING, IT ALSO DISPELS THE MYTH THAT ALL MEXICAN FOOD IS UNHEALTHY.

Ignacio Maravilla, Chef/Owner,  
La Casa del Sazón



## Honoring Tradition and Serving Well-Being

At **La Casa del Sazón**, food is more than fuel—it’s family, culture, and connection. Since opening its original location on Romie Lane in 2007, this family-owned restaurant has brought the authentic flavors of Michoacán, Mexico, to Monterey County, offering vibrant dishes made with fresh, traditional ingredients like chayote, maíz, nopales, and beans. With three locations now thriving, siblings Maria and Marcos Maravilla, along with chef and co-owner Ignacio Maravilla, continue to serve meals that are flavorful, comforting, and increasingly—surprisingly—healthy.

In partnership with Blue Zones Project Monterey County, La Casa del Sazón took bold steps to rethink what healthy Mexican food could look like. Initially unsure how their deeply rooted culinary traditions would align with Blue Zones principles, the team soon discovered the joy of innovating within their heritage. Chef Ignacio found inspiration in the challenge, crafting plant-based dishes that honor Michoacán’s cuisine while

supporting well-being. As he puts it, “It’s about connecting with people on a deeper level—through food that’s both good for you and true to our culture.”

The restaurant introduced Blue Zones-inspired offerings across all locations, with dishes like the Veggie House Taco Plate, Molcajete Vegetariano, and Nopal Asado Huarache quickly becoming customer favorites. Healthy catering options were added, and simple yet meaningful changes—like serving chips only upon request and removing salt shakers from tables—quietly reinforced a more intentional dining experience. All this, without sacrificing flavor or hospitality.

Beyond the menu, La Casa del Sazón embraced its role as a community connector. The team supported BZPMC events—from Taco Tuesdays with college students to Valentine’s Day specials—and helped lead neighborhood celebrations that spotlighted eating wisely. The restaurant also fostered new collaborations, working with partners like the **YMCA** and **Salinas City Elementary School District** to extend its impact beyond the dining room.

The results have been powerful. Sales

of Blue Zones-inspired dishes continue to grow across all locations, with some locations going from zero to an average of 12 to 16 dishes sold per week. Signature items like the Veggie House Taco Plate have become staples, and customers are increasingly seeking out these healthier options—proof that good-for-you food can still feel like a celebration.

## Key Actions and Innovations

- Introduced more than six Blue Zones-inspired dishes across multiple locations, including vegetarian molcajetes, huaraches, and taco plates.
- Developed a Blue Zones-inspired catering menu, contributing to events and local celebrations.
- Sources local produce in season and promotes smoke-free dining environments.

Through shared meals, and community events, the Maravilla family is showing that healthy living can be rooted in culture—and that the table is still one of the best places to spark positive change.

## Double Designation at the Portola Hotel & Spa

In the city of Monterey, the **Portola Hotel & Spa** is a cherished retreat. Seated right on the bay, a stone's throw from the Old Fisherman's Wharf, it's known for fresh seafood and enchanting views of the coast.

Now, it has earned even more bragging rights by becoming the first dual Blue Zones Project approval in Monterey County. The hotel itself earned Blue Zones Project Approved™ worksite designation, and its eateries—**Jack's Monterey** and **Peter B's Brewpub**—became Blue Zones Project Approved™ restaurants.

The worksite approval came first, establishing connections with local BZPMC staff and opening the door for future collaboration. Notably, Jack's and Peter B's had a demonstrated interest in providing healthier options, as evidenced by their use of locally sourced ingredients.

This enabling environment was complemented by leadership support,

particularly from Food and Beverage Director **Brian Hein** and Executive Chef **Carl Ashurst**. Chef Ashurst became a beacon of leadership buy-in, setting an example for staff and patrons through his own health evolution.

By reducing his meat consumption, increasing his vegetable intake, and exercising more, Ashurst lost an impressive 25 pounds, showcasing the cumulative benefit of healthy choices over time.

The introduction of Blue Zones-inspired meals to Jack's and Peter B's menus has been a resounding success. Guests and staff have embraced the healthier options, which include creative plant-based dishes.

In all its efforts, the Portola Hotel & Spa has shown its commitment to both employee and guest well-being, aligning culinary excellence with healthier living.

### Key Actions and Innovations

- Introduced 5 Blue Zones-inspired dishes, including one children's menu item.

- In March 2024, Jack's sold 122 BZP dishes in one week, while Peter B's sold 33, up from zero at baseline.
- Removed saltshakers from tables and began charging for refills on sugar-sweetened beverages, to encourage more mindful sodium and sugar intake.
- Priced plant-based protein entrées lower than their meat counterparts, creating a material incentive for patrons to make healthier choices.
- Standardized plate sizes to 10 inches and do not charge customers to split plates.

With a thoughtful blend of leadership, innovation, and community partnership, the Portola Hotel & Spa is not just redefining hospitality on the Central Coast—it's proving that well-being and world-class service can thrive side by side. As a dual-approved Blue Zones Project site, it sets a powerful precedent for what's possible when health becomes part of the guest experience.



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BLUE ZONES PROJECT MONTEREY COUNTY HAS CONTRIBUTED GREATLY TO OUR FOCUS ON PROVIDING MORE HEALTHY OPTIONS. WE'RE PROUD TO HAVE JACKS MONTEREY AND PETER B'S BREWPUB JOIN PORTOLA HOTEL & SPA WITH A BLUE ZONES PROJECT RECOGNITION, AS WE CONTINUE TO COMMIT OURSELVES TO NOT ONLY SUPPORT OUR EMPLOYEES' WELL-BEING, BUT ALSO OUR GUESTS'.

Brian Hein, Food and Beverage Director, Portola Hotel & Spa

## A Local Classic with a Fresh Perspective

Since 1982, **La Plaza Bakery** has been a beloved, family-owned bakery and restaurant serving the heart of Monterey County. What began in Soledad has grown into a regional favorite, with seven locations across the county—in Salinas, Gonzales, Soledad, Greenfield, and King City—known for their warm hospitality, authentic Mexican cuisine, and custom cakes.

La Plaza Bakery's deep roots in tradition have never held it back from innovation. In 2022, the King City location became a Blue Zones Project Approved™ restaurant, completing over 50 actions to support healthier dining. Today, all seven La Plaza Bakery locations are Blue Zones Project Approved™, reflecting

the business's shared commitment to nurturing the community in every sense of the word.

La Plaza Bakery King City's partnership with Blue Zones Project Monterey County has inspired new opportunities to support health while staying true to its cultural heritage. From showcasing plant-based dishes at community events to contributing traditional recipes like nopales with garbanzos to the Blue Zones Project cookbook, the team has embraced the opportunity to reimagine what Mexican food can be—flavorful, satisfying, and good for you.

Their Blue Zones-inspired catering menu now provides healthier options for schools, families, and organizations across the county, and their support of events like the Gonzales/King City Kickoff and Pigs & Pinot celebration has helped introduce hundreds of residents to more plant-forward, nutrient-rich meals.

### Key Actions and Innovations

- Introduced 10 plant-forward, Blue Zones-inspired dishes
- Offers half-size portions and single tacos to encourage mindful eating

- Collaborated with BZPMC to display healthy options on new digital screen menus
- Eliminated default offerings of bread, chips, and sugary drink refills

Since implementing Blue Zones best practices, La Plaza Bakery King City has tripled weekly sales of its Blue Zones-inspired menu items—from 10 units in 2023 to an average of 30 units in 2024. Online reviews reflect steady satisfaction, with Google ratings holding strong at 4.3 and more customers highlighting healthier items like the vegetarian burrito.

Looking ahead, La Plaza Bakery King City remains committed to building on this momentum. They'll continue developing new plant-based menu items, listening to customer feedback, and participating in Blue Zones-inspired initiatives—helping to shape a healthier, more vibrant future for their community, one dish at a time.



## GROCERY STORES

### Local grocery stores promote healthy foods and cooking skills.

Grocery stores influence food decisions. The actions we take to determine what we eat begin at the store. **About 60 percent of the food we purchase is highly processed, fatty, salty, or sugary.**<sup>26</sup> Grocery store promotions and design layout can influence those choices for the better.

In the U.S., healthy eating could generate an estimated savings of \$114.5 billion per year through reduced medical costs, increased productivity, and decline in heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, and osteoporotic hip fractures.<sup>27</sup>

Americans visit the grocery store almost twice a week on average, and their food choices impact their health and productivity. The design of many grocery stores and the deals they promote often point people to unhealthy foods.

Blue Zones Project Monterey County created awareness around these issues, and **14 local grocers took steps to implement best practices and become Blue Zones Project Approved™ grocery stores.**

In Marina, **El Rancho Market** used shelf talkers to highlight Blue Zones foods and encourage healthier choices, while **Grocery Outlet Marina** hosted a store tour to educate the community about nutritious options.

In Seaside, **Nations Market** added a produce stand, increasing the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables while diversifying their offerings. Moreover, patrons have free access to recipes and nutrition resources.

Other measures taken by Blue Zones Approved™ grocery stores include placing healthier beverages in prominent places, using signage to highlight fresh produce, displaying educational diabetes materials and creating healthy checkout lanes.



### WHY IT MATTERS

Sixty percent of purchases are unplanned. Placing attractive produce or other healthy products at the front of the store, at the deli, or at the checkout area can encourage “impulse” purchase of these healthy items.<sup>28</sup>



## Royal Feasting at La Princesa Market

**La Princesa (meaning “the princess”) Market** in King City has lived up to its name by working diligently to help patrons eat and live like royalty. This dedication to promoting healthy food choices and fostering community well-being earned La Princesa King City (LPKC) a Blue Zones Project Approved™ designation in May 2023.

The grocery store was certainly well-placed to effect meaningful change. It is one of just five locally owned markets serving Monterey County, and one of a handful of stores in its community of approximately 13,000 residents.

Recognizing the opportunity to set a standard in its locale,

LPKC employed various strategies to make healthy choices easier and more accessible. The store is peppered with Blue Zones Project (BZP) healthy recipe cards for easy meal inspiration, and BZP shelf talkers that highlight nutritious options. Moreover, it features a Blue Zones-inspired foods endcap consisting of healthy items.

In April 2024, the store embraced a high-impact initiative, becoming one of seven Monterey County establishments to join the Double Up Food Bucks (DUFBS) program.

DUFBS is a nationally recognized initiative that makes healthy foods more affordable. Active in 29 states, the program matches CalFresh/SNAP dollars, enabling shoppers to receive a 50% discount when using their EBT card to buy California-grown produce.

As a result, \$30 worth of California grown fruits and vegetables would only cost the shopper \$15. This initiative is certainly needed in King City, which has one of the highest rates of food insecurity in the region. Furthermore, during the summer months of 2025, the incentive has increased to 75% off CA-grown produce purchase. In that manner, \$30 worth of produce only cost \$7.50.

By aligning its efforts with BZP principles and the DUFBS program, LPKC is expanding community access to affordable and nutritious meals—proving that you needn’t be wealthy to eat like a king.

Importantly, all four other locations in Monterey County, including three in Salinas and one in Greenfield, are also Blue Zones Approved and have undergone similarly impactful transformations.

## Key Actions and Innovations

- La Princesa King City hosts a quarterly Food Insecurity Cadre tabling to promote DUFBS and assist customers with CalFresh applications.
- Placed signage throughout store and established a healthy checkout lane to promote fresh for you options.

La Princesa is committed to sustaining and expanding its well-being initiatives into the future.



### BY THE NUMBERS

Since Double Up Food Bucks implementation, the percentage of California grown produce sales to total produce sales has increased by 30 percent.



”

I LOVE THIS IDEA THAT WE ARE ABLE TO HELP THE CALIFORNIA GROWERS, AND ARE HELPING THE COMMUNITY. PRICES ARE HIGH AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS ARE STRUGGLING, ESPECIALLY SENIORS AND THOSE WITH KIDS. FOR PEOPLE WITH EBT, IT'S EXTRA HELP.

Jackie Chon, General Manager,  
La Princesa Market



## PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Community and faith-based organizations can inspire healthy change.

Organizations that bring people together—whether through shared beliefs, interests, or service—play a powerful role in shaping healthier, happier lives. Research shows that a strong sense of belonging and regular participation in a supportive community can positively impact well-being and even extend lifespan. For example, a study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that women who frequently attended religious services had a significantly lower risk of death from all causes, including cardiovascular disease and cancer.

Whether it's a faith community, cultural group, or local nonprofit, organizations that foster connection are well positioned to encourage positive habits—like volunteering, eating well, and moving naturally.

Across Monterey County, both community and faith-based organizations partnered with Blue Zones Project to support their members in living

healthier, more purposeful lives. **Thirty-nine organizations adopted practices to become designated Blue Zones Project Participating Organizations**, offering their members access to cooking demos, Walking Moais, Purpose Workshops, and volunteer opportunities that helped individuals use their time and talents for a greater good.

Members of **Bethlehem Lutheran Church** had the pleasure of attending a Purpose Workshop to help them discover their gifts and connect them with the church's ministry. Under Pastor **Josh Schmidt's** leadership, the church has integrated Blue Zones principles into its operations: establishing two Walking Moais, hosting cooking demonstrations that welcome nonmembers, and installing a bike rack to encourage natural movement.

**All Things New Church** consistently provided nutritious foods at meetings and events. Moreover, church leaders practiced what they preached: exemplifying physical activity and environmental stewardship by hosting a cleanup at Del Monte Beach. Congregants also benefitted from Community Volunteer Days and Purpose Workshops offered by Blue Zones Project Monterey County.



## Local Partners Inspire Well-Being, Purpose, and Connection

Blue Zones Project is more than a well-being initiative—it's a movement powered by committed individuals and local organizations working together to help people move more, connect deeply, find purpose, and give back to their communities. From faith-based groups and community centers to wineries and small businesses, each partner brings its own unique contribution to the collective goal of improving community well-being.

Their stories show that no matter the setting, simple, consistent actions rooted in connection and care can create powerful ripple effects.

For the past three summers, **CRŪ Winery** has partnered with **Valley Farm Management** and Blue Zones Project Monterey County (BZPMC) to host a popular Hike & Wine series. These monthly hikes in Soledad have become a beloved tradition, attracting both locals and visitors to explore nature, meet new people, and downshift together.

What began in 2023 as a small three-part event has grown into an eight-part seasonal series—and its success shows no signs of slowing down. With scenic trails and time to connect over a glass of wine, participants enjoy both natural movement and meaningful conversation.

The Hike & Wine events engaged over 300 participants across 2023 and 2024, with monthly hikes drawing 20 to 60 attendees each. Events routinely sell out, reflecting strong community interest in opportunities for movement and meaningful connection.

The **Soledad Community Center**, part of **Soledad Parks & Recreation**, officially became a Blue Zones Project Participating Organization in 2022—but its work to support community well-being started long before that. Together with BZPMC, the center has created a space where people of all ages come together to cook, learn, and thrive.

From bilingual cooking demos and film screenings to wellness fairs and National Night Out events, the center serves as a gathering place where health and joy go hand in hand. By co-hosting over eight well-being events with BZPMC, Soledad

Community Center has reached more than 150 residents, including seniors, families, and youth.

With infectious energy and a strong community spirit, **Monterey Bay Moves** has helped lead well-being initiatives across the Peninsula. Even during pandemic challenges, founder **Elizabeth Plante** and her team remained committed to inspiring others to live healthier lives through simple, actionable practices.

From Walking Moais and Zumba Masterclasses to the launch of Marina Wellness Week, Monterey Bay Moves shows how small habits, when supported by community, can lead to big changes.

As a longtime community champion, **United Way Monterey County (UWMC)** embodies Blue Zones principles of purpose and giving back. Through its partnership with BZPMC, United Way has continued to offer its staff and network new ways to move naturally, find purpose, and support one another.

Whether it's promoting active transportation through the To the Moon Challenge, encouraging staff wellness with outdoor celebrations, or collaborating on





charitable giving campaigns, United Way's commitment to community permeates its work.

From vineyards and hiking trails to church halls and recreation centers, organizations like these exemplify the power of community partnership in building healthier, happier lives. By integrating well-being into their missions, spaces, and events, they're helping individuals across Monterey County live with more movement, more purpose, and more connection.

”

**BLUE ZONES IS ALSO A HEALTHY CONNECTION TO OUR COMMUNITY THAT REMINDS US TO TAKE CARE OF OUR BODIES AS LIVING TEMPLES AS WELL AS INVITE OTHERS TO JOIN IN OUR MEETINGS IN ORDER TO DISCERN THE PURPOSE OF THEIR LIVES AND TO GROW IN FAITH.**

Josh Schmidt, Pastor, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

## Building a Culture of Health through Sport and Community

Founded in 2008 by dedicated local volunteers, the **Salinas Regional Sports Authority (SRSA)** began with a bold vision: to address the growing need for recreational spaces where youth could safely engage in sports, learn life skills, and grow into healthy, connected adults. What began as a hub for weekend soccer games has evolved into a cornerstone of community well-being—earning SRSA recognition as a Blue Zones Project Participating Organization in 2022.

SRSA manages the **Salinas Regional Soccer Complex (SRSC)**, a multi-phase development that serves thousands of local families each week. But its impact goes far beyond the field. In partnership with Blue Zones Project Monterey County (BZPMC), SRSA has integrated well-being into the fabric of the complex—making health, connection, and purpose part of the everyday experience.

Through this partnership, SRSA has

taken meaningful action to support the health of players, parents, and visitors alike. Together with BZPMC, they have installed outdoor fitness equipment, hydration stations, and stretching signage along walking paths. The complex now hosts free well-being activities, including Walking Moais, Family Walks, and expert-led walks with medical professionals from **Natividad** and partners like **Ecology Action**. Classes in partnership with the **Salinas YMCA**, including Zumba and U-Jam, bring joyful movement to the sidelines.

SRSA has also created a tobacco-free environment, promoted healthier food and beverage choices during events, and actively encouraged volunteerism through monthly clean-ups—efforts that foster both individual and community pride. To date, over 260 individuals have taken part in volunteer activities at the complex through Blue Zones Project efforts.

These changes have been supported by a growing network of local organizations. Collaborations with **Salinas Valley Health**, **Natividad**, **Ecology Action**, and the **Salinas YMCA** have brought new resources and programs to the complex. Chevron and

the Open Goal Project teamed up for a giving campaign, providing gear and training for youth to stay active at home.

## Key Actions and Innovations

- Partnered with local businesses to provide free water and fresh fruit during practices and matches, and installed a public water fountain, to support hydration and reduce reliance on sugar-sweetened beverages.
- Hosts regular community clean-ups that encourage volunteerism, civic pride, and social connection.
- Formed a Health and Well-Being Council within SRSA to help guide and sustain health-centered programming at the complex.



PLACES: PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS



To ensure long-term impact, SRSA has established a Health and Well-Being Council and continues to coordinate with BZPMC to bring culturally relevant, bilingual programming to the primarily Hispanic community it serves. With the addition of a community coordinator focused on well-being, SRSA is further aligning its operations with Blue Zones Project principles and expanding opportunities for residents in Monterey County and beyond.

From humble beginnings to becoming a model of community-driven transformation, SRSA is proving that investing in sports and open space can be a powerful vehicle for health, connection, and a stronger future for all.

“  
THE BLUE ZONES PROJECT PROGRAM HAS PROVIDED US WITH RESOURCES AND SUPPORT TO HELP US GROW AND BETTER SERVE OUR COMMUNITY. THROUGH THEIR EVENTS AND INITIATIVES, WE HAVE ENHANCED THE SRSC TO MAKE IT A SPACE WHERE FAMILIES CAN ENJOY A SAFE AND HEALTHIER LIFESTYLE. BEING A BLUE ZONES PROJECT PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATION HAS GIVEN US CREDIBILITY AND RECOGNITION IN THE COMMUNITY.

Jonathan DeAnda, Manager, Salinas Regional Soccer Complex



# PEOPLE

Blue Zones Project encourages people to optimize their homes and social environments, provides opportunities for individuals to discover meaning at Purpose Workshops, facilitates volunteer experiences to help people connect with the community, and offers programs that deliver support through healthy social networks.

PEOPLE

## STRONG SOCIAL CONNECTIONS HELP RESIDENTS MOVE MORE, EAT BETTER, CONNECT, AND DOWNSHIFT

Our connections to friends, family, and those around us are very powerful. They can shape our lives in more ways than we realize.

Research shows that even your friends' friends' friends—people you don't even know—can affect your health, happiness, and behaviors.<sup>29</sup>

In Monterey County, people of all ages, cultures, and backgrounds united to affect positive change in their communities through Blue Zones Project. From the program's initial launch in Salinas in 2019 to its expansion across the county and community certification in 2025:

41,325

individuals involved in the Project.

4,083

residents donated their time, skills, and passions toward volunteer opportunities tracked as part of Blue Zones Project.

2,042

residents participated in Purpose Workshops to rediscover and apply their gifts in their daily lives.

1,167

people met up with a Moai for connecting to walk or eat healthier together.

2,358

individuals attended a plant-based cooking class or gardening demonstration.



### WHAT'S A MOAI?

Moai is a concept from Okinawa, Japan, that roughly means coming together for a common purpose. When you find your Moai, you find your personal board of directors — a committed group of individuals supporting each other and working collectively to improve well-being, for life.



## PEOPLE

The world's longest-lived people in blue zones areas have always understood the power of social connectedness. In Okinawa, "moais"—groups of about five people who commit to each other for life—provide social connection, emotional, and sometimes financial support in times of need. Moai members have the stress-shedding security of knowing there is always someone there for them.

Spending time with people who positively influence one another is crucial. In Monterey County, we embrace the power of social connections to bring citizens together through groups, clubs, and community organizations.

**Move more.** Over **100 Walking Moais** were created throughout the community, building long-lasting friendships while exploring our community on foot.

**Eat better.** A total of **87 cooking classes and demonstrations brought 2,358 people together** to learn to cook new plant-based dishes. Partnering with organizations like **CHISPA**, the **Monterey Public Library**, and **Salinas Public Libraries** to host cooking classes led by volunteer chefs from **La Casa del Sazón** and **La Cantina**, and nursing students from **Hartnell College** created opportunities to meet people where they are.

**Connect and have the right outlook.** Blue zones

centenarians also put an emphasis on connecting with their reason for being. Whether through family, career, or community, living with purpose pays off. Blue Zones researchers have found that people who have a clear sense of purpose in life tend to live about seven years longer than those who don't.<sup>30</sup>

Through volunteering, Purpose Workshops, and Purpose Moais, Blue Zones Project encourages individuals to discover their innate gifts. We help our community members match their passions and commitment to volunteer opportunities that deepen their sense of purpose.

More than **2,000 people sought to discover their gifts at a Purpose Workshop** and put their skills to work by giving back to Monterey County through volunteer work. **With over 375 volunteer events more than 12,258 hours donated, volunteers in Monterey County—including all-star volunteers like Anne Vallone, Kay Lee, Linnea Carlton, Maria Best, Vivian Leyva, and groups like 831 Niner Empire—have generated over \$492,000 in value for the community.**<sup>31</sup>

Today, **66 percent of Monterey County residents report they are thriving in life, compared to 58.6 percent in 2019.**



### WHY IT MATTERS

Residents across Monterey County are showing up for each other in big ways. Today, 70.4 percent of adults report having someone in their lives who always encourages them to be healthy up from 60.9 percent in 2019!

”

I FEEL THAT BLUE ZONES PROJECT MONTEREY COUNTY HAS IMPROVED MY WELL-BEING. NOW, WHEN MEETING FRIENDS FOR A MEAL, I OFTEN LOOK FOR RESTAURANTS THAT HAVE A BZP [DESIGNATION]. I CONTINUE TO HAVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH INDIVIDUALS I HAVE MET THROUGH THE VARIOUS MOAIS.

Michelle Overmeyer, Blue Zones Project Monterey County Committee Member and Moai Leader





## Serving Well-Being Through Inspired Thai

Eating together makes a big difference. Obesity is associated with a significantly greater risk for over 20 chronic diseases and health conditions.

**And, research shows that adolescents who eat dinner with their families are 15 percent less likely to become obese.**<sup>32</sup> But there are also the intangible impacts. A report by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse found that teens who eat dinner with their families more than three times a week are less likely to do poorly in school.<sup>33</sup>

Driven by this evidence and more, Blue Zones Project Monterey County (BZPMC) created opportunities for locals to attend community-based, in person classes that empowered them to prepare healthful meals for themselves and their families.

People of all backgrounds and skill levels showed interest in learning to cook fresh, delicious cuisine with plant-based ingredients. BZPMC held 87 free cooking demonstrations across the county, attracting over 2,300 people willing to draw

inspiration from the diets of the world's longest-lived people.

Local partnerships were central to the projects' success. BZPMC built a network of chefs, restaurant owners, and instructors who brought the vision to life.

**Goi Yujaroen**, owner of **Thai Is Fun** cooking class, is one such partner. Though Goi is a qualified educator, she's also been teaching people to cook for 25 years. After immigrating to the United States, she started her business to bring a taste of home to those curious to learn.

Goi was already aligned with Blue Zones Principles, having discovered them through the "Live to 100: Secrets of the Blue Zones" documentary series. Soon after, she attended a BZPMC cooking demonstration and met the Executive Director of the project. In a matter of weeks, Goi hosted a class of her own for the BZPMC Food Environment team, and the partnership bloomed from there.

Thai Is Fun became a recognized Participating Organization in March 2024 and Goi has led cooking demonstrations for Blue Zones Project Approved™ worksites like **Aspire Health** and **Montage Health**, as

well as community partners like **Everyone's Harvest**.

She has numerous Blue Zones-inspired dishes on her class menu, and a total of 6 plant-based recipe options. In true Power 9 spirit, she takes a holistic view on health: using her business to inspire patrons to move more.

Goi uses bike parking signs to encourage patrons to use active transportation, and starts her cooking classes by leading students through stretching exercises. She also promotes BZPMC community volunteer events and allows participants to share their gratitude and lessons learned at the end of each class.

Cooking is an essential life skill that empowers us to take control of our health. By helping people to feed themselves better, and incorporating well-being principles into her teachings, Goi serves up more value than one can fit on a plate.

## Making a Difference in Marina

Many wise people have said that global change starts with personal action. In the city of Marina, someone took that to heart.

Instead of waiting for others to create the health-conscious community she desired, **Anne Vallone** made a plan. She started a single walking group for people to gather together, move naturally and cultivate a culture of wellness.

From these humble beginnings, a small movement sprang forth. The walking group evolved into a network of thriving moais: a monthly hiking moai that explores trails across Monterey County, a bi-weekly walking moai, and weekly men's biking moai that rides from Marina to Monterey and back.

As a tasty bonus, participants also enjoy a potluck moai to celebrate the completion of each 10-week walking cycle. And there's certainly been a lot to celebrate! To date, the group has completed over 150 weeks of consecutive walks.

Often, a single person's effort to achieve well-being inspires those in their immediate circle. But when that person creates space and opportunity for others to change their lives, the impact is limitless.

Anne's partnership with Blue Zones Project Monterey County also expanded the reach of her moais. Participants consistently credit these gatherings with helping them maintain their health and fitness, support family members in their wellness journeys and enjoy the coast with friends old and new.

For many, these moais provide pockets of peace, allowing them to start their days on a positive note, before the busyness of life kicks in.

Anne has also become a BZPMC Ambassador, volunteering over 300 hours to support community events and outreach. Her leadership is a testament to the fact that a single person can spark a world of change.



### BY THE NUMBERS

The Marina 822 Walking Moai has completed over 150 consecutive weeks of walks since it started in 2022, with some events drawing over 60 participants.



”

ONE OF MY  
FAVORITE THINGS  
ABOUT BEING  
THE CAPTAIN OF  
THE MARINA 822  
WALKING MOAI IS  
GETTING PEOPLE  
OUT TO MOVE  
NATURALLY AND  
MAKE FRIENDS.

Anne Vallone, Blue Zones Project  
Monterey County Ambassador and  
Volunteer



# CONGRATS, MONTEREY COUNTY!

**We did this together.** By putting our personal and collective well-being first, we're making healthy choices easier, creating more economic opportunities, and ensuring a better quality of life for everyone. **Here's to making Monterey County one of the healthiest regions in the nation, where residents are living better, together.**



CONCLUSION

## WITH GRATITUDE

Blue Zones Project is a testament to the effectiveness of collective impact. We have seen tremendous improvement in the health and well-being of our community and its residents over the past seven years.

The improvements we've seen would not have been possible without the passion and dedication of hundreds of volunteers, organizations, and our sponsors—Salinas Valley Health, Taylor Farms, and Montage Health.

Thank you to every community leader, committee member, ambassador, community partner, and organization for the countless hours invested, not just in the work of Blue Zones Project, but in making Monterey County a healthier place to live, work, learn, and play.

Thank you for believing in the dream of a healthier community, and for putting your passions and resources to work. Because of you, communities across Monterey County are experiencing tremendous well-being improvement.



BROUGHT TO  
MONTEREY  
COUNTY BY:



## CONCLUSION

# Blue Zones Project Monterey County Team (Past and Present)

Alexis Diaz-infante  
Aline Reyna  
Amber Shoebridge  
Ana Acosta  
Antonio Vargas  
Brenda Cabrera  
Chelsea Storm-Larsen  
Christina Ferrante  
Cindy Foster Ruiz  
Clarissa Johnston  
Dalila Alvarado  
Dina Uribe  
Genevieve LeBlanc  
Griselda Reyes  
Karissa Lopez  
Katie Morataya-Picazo  
Kendra Howell  
Larisa Kennedy

Lauren Redden  
Lidia Wilding  
Lisa Wegley  
Mackenzie Fisher  
Mandy Lebow  
Marcus Pulido-Ojeda  
Maria Steller  
Maribel Roque  
Melissa Alvarez  
Paola Delgado  
Paul Ligorski  
Rachel Thompson  
Stephanie Sorensen (In Memoriam)  
Tanja Roos  
Tiffany M. DiTullio  
Veronica Plascencia  
Victor Rey

## CONCLUSION

If there's one thing the story of Blue Zones Project demonstrates, it's that many people and many organizations play an essential part in community success. Those recognized here contributed significant time, effort, and resources to the cause. Special thanks to these leaders—and applause to all who continue to help make Monterey County a healthier, happier community.

## Governance Committee (Past and Present)

Adrienne Laurent	Debie Montoya	Linda Taylor
Christiana Kearns	Laura Zehm	Liz Lorenzi

## Steering Committee (Past and Present)

Adele Frese	Jean Salcido	Mike LeBarre
Bruce Delgado	Joanna Oppenheim, MD	Monica Anzo
Carmen Gil	Joe Gunter (In Memoriam)	Noemy Loveless
Colby Pereira	Julie Edgcomb	Paul Farmer
Daniel Gonzales	Katy Castagna	Ray Corpuz
Debbie Hale	Ken Goebel	Rene Mendez
Deneen Guss	Kimbley Craig	Seaberry Nachbar
Elsa Jimenez	Laurel Lee-Alexander	Steve McShane
Gloria De La Rosa	Luis Alejo	Tim Nysten (In Memoriam)
Ian Olgesby	Luis Vargas	Tony Amezcua
James Gilbert	Mark Faylor	Yvette Irving
Jane Russo	Mary Ann Leffel	
Janelle Garcia Zaveche	Melissa Kendrick	

## Leadership Team (Past and Present)

Alfred Diaz-Infante (In Memoriam)

Amanda Meyer

Belinda Varela

Britt Rios-Ellis

Cali Stiles

Casey Grover, MD

Claudia Otero

Dana Armstrong

Daniel Meewis

David Diehl

David Jacobs

Ernesto Vela

Estevan Jimenez

Gene Fischer

Hester Parker

James Bogart

Jamie Stracuzzi

Jason Giles

Jose Rios

Kameron Macdonald

Karen Curtis

Karina Rusk

Kim Stemler

Marguerite Walker

Martha Martinez

Matthew Mogensen

Monica Sciuto

Niaomi Hrepich, RD

Paola Ball

Pk Diffenbaugh

Rita Burks

Sheila Phan

Tina Torrez

Yasmine Elsherbini

Yesenia Velarde

## Special Thanks

Blue Zones Project Engagement Committee

Blue Zones Project Worksite Committee

Blue Zones Project Schools Committee

Blue Zones Project Retail Food Committee

Blue Zones Project Built Environment Policy Committee

Monterey County Food System Coalition

Blue Zones Project Tobacco Policy Committee

Community planners and elected officials who are implementing best practices to make our communities safer for pedestrians, cyclists, and cars.

Champions who led the work in over 248 organizations that are making healthy choices easier for those they serve.

Our many ambassadors who say “yes!” to well-being.

## Sector Committee Members (Past and Present)

Adriana Granados  
Alex Lopez  
Alexis Diaz-Infante  
Allan Rains  
Allison Duckworth  
Amanda Nichols  
Amelia Conlen  
Ana Acosta  
Ana Mendoza  
Angela Hernandez  
Angela Mejia  
Angelica Chavez  
Anne Vallone  
Ariana Green  
Audrey Oswald  
Cameron Hill  
Candice Camacho  
Carissa Purnell  
Chris Brown  
Chris Vicioso  
Christina Varela  
Clarisa Gutierrez

Claudia Morales  
Dana Marshall  
Darren Nutt  
David Eakin  
Dina Uribe  
Drew Coleman  
Efrain Rodarte-Flores  
Ellie Clifton  
Emily Garcia  
Erika Yanez  
Erin Sawyer  
Ernesto Altamirano  
Gabiela Chavez  
Gabiela Schlesinger-James  
Gino Garcia  
Gonzalo Coronado  
Gretchen Kelly  
Guadalupe Covarrubias-Martinez  
Hilary Medel  
Irene Vargas  
Janelle Garcia Zaveche  
Janet Fearnside  
Janine Bouyea  
Jessica Mckillip  
John Avella

Jonathan De Anda  
Jonathan Moore  
Jorge Alejos  
Jorge Rubio  
José Arreola  
Josh Schmidt  
Julie Callahan  
Julio Castro  
Kacy Smith  
Kalah Bumba  
Kari Bernardi  
Karina Silva  
Katia Gutierrez  
Ken Rozin  
Kolby Higgins  
Krista Reuther  
LeAnn Contapay  
Lilia Chagolla  
Lisa Dobbins  
Lisa Harris  
Lorena Perez  
Lorenzo Sanchez  
Louie Diaz-Infante  
Lucy Zepeda  
Lupita Garcia

## CONCLUSION

Margaret D'Arrigo  
Maria Flores  
Marisela Lara  
Maritza Salazar  
Mary Franscioni  
Melanie Wong  
Mia McKernan  
Micha James  
Michelle House  
Michelle Long  
Monica Rico  
Nadine Burke  
Nancy Majewski  
Nicole Williams  
Nora Fairgarden  
Olga Ramirez  
Parisa Gomez  
Patricia Penaloza  
Qadiri Zebrowski  
Quinn Junghans  
Ramona Spears  
Raquel Santillan  
Reyna Alcala  
Robert Cullen  
Roberto Guerrero

Roselyn Traina  
Sabrina Martinez  
Sanra Ritten  
Sarah Doherty  
Silka Saavedra  
Sonia Vallejo  
Stephenie Verduzco  
Susana Mancera  
Suzy Covarrubias  
Sylvia Agamo  
Sylvia Santos  
Therese Phillips  
Todd Muck  
Ulises Cisneros  
Ursulla Scardina  
Valeria Hernandez  
Victor Ramos  
Victor Rey  
Yolanda Barba

## Designated Organizations

### Blue Zones Worksites

Alisal Union School District

Alvarez Technology Group

Aspire Health

Blue Zones Project Monterey County - Salinas

Blue Zones Project Monterey County - Monterey

Braga Fresh Family Farms

Braga Fresh Foods - Gonzales

Braga Fresh Foods - Spreckles

California Water Service Co

Carmel Unified School District

Carmel Valley Manor

CCVNA and Hospice

Central California Alliance for Health

Central Coast YMCA

City of Gonzales

City of King

City of Marina

City of Salinas

City of Seaside

Community Health Innovations

Corral de Tierra Country Club

CSUMB University Corporation

Cypress Healthcare Partners

D'Arrigo California

Del Monte Aviation

Doctors on Duty - Lighthouse

Doctors on Duty - Marina

Doctors on Duty - Seaside

Gateway Center of Monterey County

Gonzales Adult School

Greenfield Union School District

Hartnell College

Hartnell College - South County Centers

Hartnell College- Soledad

Hyatt Regency Monterey

King City Union School District

Leavitt Central Coast Insurance Services

Marina Coast Water District

Montage Health

Monterey County Office of Education

Monterey County Weekly

Monterey Jet Center

Monterey Marriott

Monterey Peninsula College

Monterey Plaza Hotel and Spa

Monterey Signs

Natividad Medical Center

North Monterey County Unified School District

Ocean Mist Farms

OHANA

Pacific Valley Bank

Pacific Valley Bank - King City

Pacific Valley Bank Corporation

Portola Hotel and Spa

PRO\*ACT

Rancho Cielo

Robert Cullen Insurance and Financial Services Agency

Salinas City Elementary School District

Salinas Valley Health

Salinas Valley Health Foundation

Taylor Farms

Taylor Farms - Gonzales

Taylor Farms Family Health & Wellness Center

Taylor Farms Food Service

Taylor Farms Retail Plant

Transportation Agency for Monterey County

Valley Farm Management - Soledad

Vertis

Visiting Nurses Association (VNA)

Wald Ruhnke and Dost Architects

## APPENDIX

### Blue Zones Schools

Alisal Virtual Academy  
All Saints Day School  
Arroyo Seco Academy  
Bardin Elementary School  
Bay View Academy - Lower Campus  
Bay View Academy - Upper Campus  
Boronda Meadows Elementary School  
Castroville Elementary School  
Central Bay High School  
Central Coast High School  
Cesar Chavez Elementary  
Chualar Union Elementary School  
Creekside Elementary School  
Del Rey Elementary  
Dr Oscar F. Loya Elementary School  
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. School of the Arts  
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Academy  
Dual Language Academy  
Echo Valley Elementary School  
Elkhorn Elementary School  
Fairview Middle School  
Frank Ledesma Elementary School  
Frank Paul Elementary School  
Gabilan Elementary School  
Gavilan View Middle School

Gonzales High School  
International School of Monterey  
Ione Olson Elementary School  
Jack Francioni Elementary School  
Jesse G. Sanchez Elementary School  
John E. Steinbeck Elementary  
Kammann Elementary School  
La Gloria Elementary School  
Lincoln Elementary School  
Loma Vista Elementary School  
Los Arboles Middle School  
Los Padres School  
Main Street Middle School  
Marina High School  
Marina Vista Elementary Arts Academy  
Mary Chapa Academy  
Monte Bella Elementary  
Monte Vista School  
Monterey Park Elementary School  
Natividad Elementary School  
North Monterey County High School  
North Monterey County Middle School  
Oak Avenue Elementary School  
Oasis Charter School  
Ord Terrace Elementary School  
Portola Butler Continuation/Pinnacle

Coastal Valley High School  
Prunedale Elementary School  
Rose Ferrero Elementary School  
Sacred Heart School  
San Benancio Middle School  
San Vicente Elementary School  
Santa Catalina School - Upper School  
Sherwood Elementary School  
Soledad High School  
Toro Park School  
University Park Elementary School  
Virginia Rocca Barton Elementary School  
Vista Verde Middle School  
Washington Union Elementary School

### Blue Zones Grocery Stores

El Mercado - Hartnell College  
El Rancho Market  
El Rey Fresh Produce  
Elroy's Fine Foods  
Grocery Outlet- Marina  
La Michoacana - Corner Store  
La Preciosa Family Market  
La Princesa - Alisal  
La Princesa - Sanborn  
La Princesa - Williams

## APPENDIX

La Princesa Greenfield  
La Princesa King City  
Nations Market  
Star Market

### Blue Zones Restaurants

Aki Fresh Mex  
Angelina's Bakery  
Bloom Coffee Shop  
Cafe Mia Brew Bar & Bistro  
Cocina 1932 Cali-Mex BBQ  
Culturas Hidalgo y Oaxaca  
Del Monte Cafe  
Deli-cioso Sandwiches and More  
Drummond Culinary Academy  
Dulce Amanecer  
Eagle Restaurant  
Earthbound Farm Stand  
East Village Cafe  
El Cantaro Vegan Restaurant  
El Colibrí Restaurant & Deli  
El Taquero Deli  
Emma's Bakery and Cafe  
Fountain Court Cafe  
Googie Grill  
Guadalajara Grill

Happy Girl Kitchen  
Hestia  
Jacks Monterey  
James Dean Sports Bar  
La Cantina Brewing Company  
La Casa del Sazón - Romie Lane  
La Casa del Sazón - Salinas St  
La Casa del Sazón 3  
La Plaza Bakery - Bardin  
La Plaza Bakery - Davis  
La Plaza Bakery - Gonzales  
La Plaza Bakery - Greenfield  
La Plaza Bakery - King City  
La Plaza Bakery - Sanborn  
La Plaza Bakery - Soledad  
La Tortuga  
Luigi's  
Main Street Bakery  
Manasiri's Crepes  
Mangia - Eat on Main  
Mezzaluna Pasteria & Mozzarella Bar  
Natividad Hospital - Garden Café  
Ohana Cafe  
Park Row Cafe  
Patria on Main  
Peninsula Cafe - Monterey Peninsula

College  
Peter B's  
Poke Bowl-Rito  
Portobello's Catering  
Portobello's on Main  
Sabor Latin Fusion  
Samson Cafe @ MIIS  
Schooners Monterey  
Steinbeck House Restaurant  
Salinas Valley Health - The Salad Bowl Café  
Tacos California Grill  
Tacos Don Beto  
The 31st Grill  
The Creperie Cafe  
Tidal Coffee  
Villa Rivera Café  
Zab Zab Thai

### Other Participating Organizations

2 Steps Ahead Performance Training  
All Things New Church  
Bethlehem Lutheran Church  
Boxing Strong  
CHISPA  
Communities for Sustainable Monterey County

## APPENDIX

CRŪ Winery  
F3 Monterey  
Foolish Times  
Friends of Seaside Parks Association  
(FOSPA)  
Fuel Cycling  
iHeart Media  
Independent Transportation Network  
Monterey County  
Interim, Inc  
Kairos Learning Solutions  
Meals on Wheels of the Salinas Valley  
Monterey Bay Moves  
Monterey County Agricultural and Rural  
Life Museum  
Monterey Peninsula Regional Park District  
Monterey Public Library & Museums  
MPC Student Health Services  
North County Recreation and Park District  
Other Brother Beer Co  
Salinas Regional Sports Authority  
Salinas Rotary Club  
Salinas Seventh Day Adventist Church  
Salvation Army Good Samaritan Center  
Sol Treasures  
Soledad Parks and Recreation  
STRENGTH Monterey  
Tatum's Garden  
Thai Is Fun  
The Core Community  
The Green Directive  
The Parenting Connection of Monterey  
County  
The Salvation Army  
The Salvation Army Transitional Housing  
United Way Monterey County  
Ventana Wildlife Society

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