INTRODUCTION
An individual’s health is inextricably linked to the overall health of his or her community. In Iowa, 26 percent of children and teens are overweight or obese, and the state ranks 16th out of all 50 states based on overall health and well-being according to the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index (WBI). Wellmark Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Iowa (Wellmark) is on a mission to improve the health and well-being of all individuals living in Iowa, including children and youth, by implementing the Blue Zones Project in large and small communities throughout the state.

GETTING STARTED
Noting that medical risk has shifted in the past three decades from infrequent, catastrophic events towards behavior- and lifestyle-induced chronic conditions, Wellmark sought innovative ways to improve the health of Iowans before they need to use the health care system. In its search for strategies, Wellmark identified the environmental approach supported by Dan Buettner’s work, known as the Blue Zones. One of the major premises of Buettner’s work is that when positive environmental change happens at a community level, all people in the community experience health benefits.

At virtually the same time that Wellmark identified the Blue Zones as a promising catalyst for change in Iowa, Healthways, an independent global provider of well-being improvement solutions, signed a five-year exclusive deal with Dan Buettner. Wellmark gathered the three parties to discuss the possibilities of working collaboratively to improve Iowa’s score on the WBI and the health of all men, women and children living in Iowa. This was the beginning of the first-ever statewide Blue Zones Project, and its goal was to move Iowa’s place on the WBI from 16 to 1 by 2016.

ABOUT THE ORIGINAL BLUE ZONES
Dan Buettner’s Blue Zones are the five parts of the world that have the largest number of residents living with a high quality of life until age 100. Buettner and a team of scientists identified specific lifestyle characteristics that each Blue Zone shared and called these characteristics the Power 9. The people living in the Blue Zones share the following habits:

1. Move naturally—they live in environments that constantly nudge them into moving without thinking about it
2. Have a sense of purpose in life
3. Down shift—they take time to relax
4. Follow the 80 percent rule—they stop eating when they are 80 percent full
5. Eat a plant slant diet—meat is limited to 4-5 times per month
6. Drink wine at 5—one to two glasses per day with friends and/or food
7. Belong to faith-based communities
8. Put loved ones first—they keep families close together, commit to life partners and invest in their children with time and love
9. Belong to the right tribe—they have social circles that support healthy behaviors

BRINGING THE BLUE ZONES TO IOWA
To bring these Power 9 principles and positive environmental changes to communities in Iowa, Wellmark launched the Blue Zones Project. The initial promise was to transform ten Iowa communities into demonstration sites with the intent to accelerate their development and inspire all Iowa communities to engage in the movement. Due to the overwhelming initial response from Iowans, Wellmark invited more communities to apply to become demonstration sites. Currently, 19 communities geographically dispersed throughout Iowa are official demonstration sites. Ultimately up to 40 demonstration sites of

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1The WBI uses results from more than 1,000 surveys of individuals per day, given over 350 days, to evaluate six key areas of well-being: life evaluation, emotional health, physical health, healthy behaviors, work environments, and basic access to care.
various sizes and geographic spread will be chosen across the state of Iowa with the goal to reach a tipping point. These communities are working towards creating sustainable environmental and policy changes with the help of national experts such as Blue Zones founder and CEO Dan Buettner and Dan Burden, founder of Walkable Communities and one of Time magazine’s “six most important civic innovators in the world.” In addition to the demonstration sites, the Wellmark Blue Zones Project provides a cadre of tools that are available to all Iowans. The tools are geared toward individuals, communities, worksites, restaurants, grocery stores and schools to improve the environments where people live, work, learn and play. The variety of available evidence-based interventions and tools includes policy checklists for schools and communities that offer suggested action items such as restricting mobile vending of unhealthy foods near schools and public playgrounds and establishing healthy food and beverage policies for city-sponsored youth sporting events.

**NEXT STEPS**

To measure how far Iowa has come in improving the health of its residents, Iowa’s place on the WBI will be assessed on an annual basis. Wellmark is also exploring the use of additional process and outcome measures being developed by an outside third party that will help to reinforce the idea that if enough people from a community are engaged in healthy behaviors, others in the community will be influenced to positively change their behavior without even knowing it. There are also plans to explore the use of outcome measures derived from health care claims data for evaluating the Blue Zones project in Iowa.

**CONCLUSION**

While the chosen demonstration sites were only recently announced in May and October 2012 and January 2013, they are already in the process of conducting focus groups, creating committees and completing blueprints for community transformation. Wellmark staff report that people living in the demonstration site communities have expressed that the initiative has brought the whole area closer together in an effort to improve the health of all members of the community.

By working with entire communities to make the healthy choice the easy choice, Wellmark is confident that there will be an improvement in the health and well-being of all children and teens living in Iowa. Wellmark anticipates that with continued cooperation of local leadership and enthusiasm from individuals, the changes adopted in Iowa communities will be sustainable for years to come.