

# SEASON'S GREETINGS

## Health Zones Update



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Over the course of July 2024-2025, the Michigan State University (MSU) Center for Community & Economic Development (CCED) examined factors affecting low-income senior populations within Ingham County utilizing AmeriCorps\*Volunteer in Service to America support. Whittling down county boundaries, VISTA member Courtney Luong dialed in on nine opportunity zones, or low-income census tracts, as identified by the U.S. Department of Treasury and overlaid concepts derived from the work of American author Dan Buettner, summarized in the Netflix documentary, *Live to 100: Secrets of the Blue Zones*, throughout her service.

**Overview of Blue Zones:** In 2005, American author Dan Buettner and Belgian demographer Michael Poulain teamed up to discover the secrets to living a longer life by studying regions where an exceptional number of people live beyond 100. Interviewing centenarians in Okinawa Prefecture in Japan, the Ogliastra Province of Sardinia in Italy, the Nicoya Peninsula in Costa Rica, the island of Icaria in Greece and Loma Linda, California, Buettner and Poulain labeled these regions “Blue Zones” and identified nine different “lifestyle habits” that may contribute to a longer and healthier life. Their focus areas included: movement, purpose, stress, bodily intake including both diet and nutrition, socialization, community, sense of belonging and relationships.

In the years since, the concept of Blue Zones and the nine habits associated with them have become subjects of scrutiny. One public health expert described Buettner and Poulain's work as "standard public health promotion 101," and indicated that they missed the mark on key areas like alcohol consumption and smoking (Amigo, 2024). Other critics point out that many Blue Zones are poor, rural areas and that their high numbers of centenarians may be caused by unreliable record keeping. In fact, with improved data collection, life expectancy actually declined in some Blue Zones.



In 2017, Poulain and Buettner ended their partnership. However, since, Buettner has monetized the concept of Blue Zones, founding "Blue Zones LLC," as a planning firm offering their services to municipalities, employers, and other organizations, promising to reshape communities in accordance with Blue Zones' healthy lifestyle attributes. As an example, to create a plan for Fort Worth, Texas, in 2017, the city paid Blue Zones, LLC over \$50 million (Roca, 2017). While there may be a level of disconnect between accurate reporting as well as lifestyle attributions and their influencing factors, researchers at the Center desired to see if any of the nine related factors could be assessed and positively influenced for those very vulnerable seniors (65+) living within the identified low-income census tracts of Ingham County known as "opportunity zones."

## **Defining Social Well-being and Quality of Life**

To help build a methodological framework to conduct this exploration beginning in July of 2024, the CCED team established a community advisory board drawing on the expertise of leaders from organizations including the MSU College of Human Medicine, MSU Age Alive, MSU Office of Public Engagement and Scholarship, MSU Computational Math, Science and Engineering, MSU Outreach & Engagement, University of Michigan Health-Sparrow, the Greater Lansing Food Bank, Community Mental Health Authority, East Lansing Prime Time, City of Lansing, Ingham County Health Department, Ingham County Land Bank and the Ingham County Office of the Treasurer as well as Tri-County Office on Aging, Capital Area District Libraries and Kiwanis Club.

Additionally, the team consulted government officials from Fort Worth, Texas and Barry County, Michigan who had previously undertaken efforts to improve their community well-being utilizing the Blue Zones model with related non-profit partners. In Fort Worth, Texas, a Blue Zones Project team was contracted to support helping the community connect, inspiring and reinforcing healthy habits as well as helping develop a new focus on people, places and policy including international researchers from universities such as Oxford. In Barry County, Michigan, a team from the Blue Zones Project was also contracted to support the development of community gardens as the beginning to a more localized food system that also positively influenced movement and socializing.

Following these informal municipal representative interviews, it was found that some of the same

purposes were already being pursued (though by many other means) in Ingham County within overlapping projects that were not necessarily collectively tracked for impact analysis. It was also found that the Blue Zones, LLC price was unaffordable, yet many tools and resources including a Tier 1 research institute's support, were already “in the backyard” at Michigan State University. Based on these conversations, CCED researchers set out to examine the ecosystem of vulnerable seniors within opportunity zones of Ingham County. To begin, the advisory board helped develop contextually-specific and community-identified definitions of social well-being and quality of life to work from.

These were formed starting with the United National Sustainable Development Goals ([sdgs.un.org/goals](https://sdgs.un.org/goals), 2025) as discussion points and conducting significant conversation amongst advisory board members to reach agreement. The working definitions are ultimately reflected as:

1. **Social Well-Being:** the measurement of feeling connected and finding purpose within an individual's social environment and relationships with others.
2. **Quality of Life:** an individual's perception of their life when thinking about their surroundings, culture, and social determinants of health in relation to their aspirations and goals.

### **Health Zone Areas of Assessment**

Recognizing some of the limitations and un-affordability of working directly with Blue Zones, LLC, the research team, with support and input of the community advisory board, also set out to create a refined list of seven focus areas and potential variables tailored to the unique needs of seniors in Ingham County utilizing the Blue Zones foci as a starting point. These were drilled down to reflect:

1. Accessible housing and indicators such as rates of homelessness, eviction, and overcrowding; cost-burdened households, rental/homeownership affordability, and availability/utilization of housing assistance.
2. Affordable healthcare and indicators such as rates of under/uninsured, out-of-pocket healthcare expenses, healthcare delayed or foregone due to cost, prescription drug affordability, medical debt, provider availability, and health facility distance and travel time.
3. Mental health and indicators such as days of poor mental health, self-reported mental health, prevalence of mental disorders, mental health provider availability, mental health treatment utilization, suicide rates, and emergency department hospitalizations for mental health disorders.
4. Access to transportation with indicators such as percentage of populations living within a quarter mile of a transit stop, walkability and bikeability scores, affordability of transit fares, and availability of subsidies.
5. Food and nutrition with indicators including household food security status, proximity to grocery stores and farmers markets, availability of fresh produce, fruit and vegetable consumption, overweight/obesity rates, and prevalence of diabetes and diet-related diseases.
6. Connectivity with indicators including frequency of social contacts, living alone, civic engagement and volunteering, membership in social organizations, and access to and use of social media.

7. Access to parks and recreation centers with indicators such as distance to, and affordability of, local parks and recreation centers and their perceived safety.

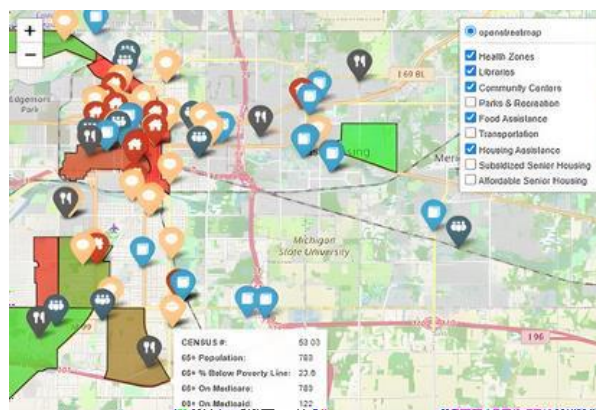
## Ecosystem Mapping

To help identify gaps and barriers to thriving within each of the seven health foci, the Health Zones team worked with an MSU Computational, Mathematics, Science, and Engineering senior capstone group of students to develop an ecosystem map. This ecosystem map is a grouping of layered map slices that viewers may choose to turn on and off based on the legend. Figure 1 below provides an example of what the map might look like when multiple items in the legend are "on" simultaneously for real-time viewing.

Jointly utilizing publicly available datasets and Python-based data processing libraries, the team cleaned, analyzed, and mapped key health-related access points on a geographic level. The final product included the map in Figure 1 that enables users, such as public health officials and policymakers, to explore spatial trends in access to health-related services or tools to help inform social and physical determinants of health outcomes. This tool aimed to provide insights for data-driven decision-making and resource allocation in the Ingham County area.

### Figure 1: MSU Healthy City Assessment Map Example

Developed by Noah Mueller, Amaan Thasin, Frank Luginbill, and Jun Han, 2025



Following, student researchers further fleshed out a layered ecosystem map of resources that helps illuminate accessibility within opportunity zones to resources such as: housing, affordable healthcare, mental health, transportation, nutrition, connectivity, and greenspace. The study wrapped up with a Lansing-area focus group hosted by the Allen Neighborhood Center bringing to light additional topics of concern for elderly, low-income residents that included: public safety, responsiveness of elected officials, services for unhoused populations and home improvement aid.

Throughout the first year of the Health Zones project, the research team and advisory board worked together to conduct research, outreach, and engagement regarding the different issues contributing to

to social and physical wellbeing. In combination with the Opportunity Zones identification as bounded areas of research within Ingham County, the reduced foci of accessible housing, affordable healthcare, mental health, access to transportation, food and nutrition, connectivity, and access to parks and recreation centers served as the basis for the ecosystem project resource map. This visual representation of data was a crucial tool for the research team as they worked to identify spatial, social, and economic focus areas for the Health Zones project. However, the ease of usability and access are difficult to navigate with limited software and file access.

Wrapping up her term of service, VISTA member Courtney Luong also helped facilitate a senior coffee hour focus group plus dialogue at the Allen Neighborhood Center. When the research team spoke with focus group participants to learn how these issues manifested themselves in the lives of community seniors, a focused snapshot of Lansing's health disparities became to varying degrees clearer and simultaneously murkier. Seniors referenced many of the same issues identified in the Health Zones' seven foci, but tied them together as symptoms of crime, homelessness, and a passive local government. It is unknown if these trends are merely perceived, or if the challenges faced by vulnerable seniors stem from a public safety crisis and less responsive local government.

To learn which areas can be targeted to most effectively achieve better health outcomes and quality of life for seniors in Ingham opportunity zones, it is recommended that the study continues into year two and three for additional focus group assessment, and that the AmeriCorps\*VISTA project be funded in support of these efforts for an additional two years. Continued research into social well-being and quality of life through the seven indicators will also help lay the foundation for future efforts that forge collaborative partnerships supporting more reciprocal dialogue between leaders in healthcare, housing, nutrition, and local communities for positive outcomes. The Center will continue to pursue funding in efforts to continue this project and expand focus groups throughout the county at senior centers and dining halls within the nine identified opportunity zone low-income census tracts.

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