

U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging

Hearing on:
“Optimizing Longevity: From Research to Action”

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Room 106 Dirksen Senate Office Building

February 12, 2025

My goal here is to convince you that most of what Americans think will lead them to a long, healthy life is misguided or just plain wrong.

I’ve spent the past 20 years partnered with National Geographic to identify, verify, and understand populations around the world with the greatest longevity. These “blue zones,” as they’re known, are places where people live up to a decade longer than the rest of us with a fraction of the chronic diseases that eat up most of the \$4.9 trillion our nation spends annually on healthcare.

The famous Danish Twin Study established years ago that only about 20% of how long we live is dictated by our genes. Another 10-15% is dictated by our health care system. That means at least two thirds of our longevity comes from something else.

So, with an advisory board of academics, my team and I set off to find the correlates and common denominators driving longevity.

On the Italian island of Sardinia, for example, our demographers found a cluster of six mountain villages that produced centenarians at a rate many times that of the U.S. People there ate a mostly whole-food, plant-based diet—cheap peasant foods like fava beans, barley, and potatoes. They prioritized family and friends over status and wealth. They prayed. (Did you know that people who go to a faith-based community 4 times a month live 4 years longer than people who don’t?) And every time these villagers went to work, school, or to visit friends, it occasioned a walk. They got in their 8,000-12,000 steps a day without even thinking about it.

The Big Secret here—and the one we miss—is that health and longevity are rarely successfully pursued. They ensue.

We spend nearly a half trillion a year trying to chase health with diet, exercise, and pills. They’re all great business plans, but they fail for almost everyone all of the time. If you start with 100 people on a diet, you lose more than 95% in two years. Exercise programs have similar drop offs.

Similarly, the \$47 billion a year Americans spend on antiaging products has not delivered a single pill, supplement, or stem cell treatment that has been shown to reverse, stop, or even slow aging.

In the blue zones, longevity ensues because people live in an environment where the healthy choice is the easy choice. The cheapest, most delicious foods are the

simplest foods. It's easier to walk places than to drive. You can't avoid face-to-face contact with your neighbors, your fellow worshipers, or the extended family that lives with you. And you have a vocabulary for your purpose in life, so it's easier to pursue it. In other words, people in the blue zones don't have to muster the resources, the daily discipline, and the presence of mind to make the healthy choice. Their environment does it for them.

So, if we want a healthier America, we should shift our focus from the folly of trying to convince 340 million people to follow a diet or health plan and instead we should strive to set them up for success. My company, Blue Zones, has helped more than 70 American cities shape policies that favor healthy foods over junk foods, to build streets for human beings, not just for cars, which can increase physical activity for the whole city by 20%, and to encourage non-smokers over smokers. We also offer Blue Zones certification for all schools, restaurants, workplaces, and places of worship that optimize their designs and policies to nudge people into moving more, socializing better, and eating healthier. The key is optimizing our living environments.

The proof is in the numbers. Using our approach, Fort Worth, Texas, reported a drop in obesity and a quarter of a billion dollars in annual healthcare savings. The Beach Cities of Southern California reported a 15% drop in BMI. And our first Blue Zones Project city, the town of Albert Lea, Minnesota, has saved 30% of their city worker health care costs since they started—and they're still making their city healthier 15 years later.

The secret to longevity does not lie in any silver bullet. The secret is to shift the focus of public policy from trying to change individual behaviors to setting up all Americans for success by making the healthy choice the easy one.

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