

TSET Better Health Podcast Transcript

Episode 19: OML: Incentive Grants for Healthier Local Environments

Sept. 30, 2021

Summary: Join the TSET Better Health Podcast team for an inside look at the annual Oklahoma Municipal League conference and how TSET grants benefit cities and schools. Since 2012, TSET has awarded Healthy Incentive Grants to more than 130 cities and towns and to numerous school sites and districts, and every grant creates healthier local environments – as determined by local residents and officials. This episode tells more about the grants that any qualifying school or community in Oklahoma can apply for, and how Healthy Community and School Incentive Grants have benefited the students, staff and community of Granite Schools and the residents of Boley and Muldrow.

[Theme music]

James Tyree: Hello and welcome to the TSET Better Health Podcast. This is your co-host James Tyree, a health communication consultant at TSET.

Cate Howell: And I am podcast producer and co-host Cate Howell.

TSET aims high for better health statewide because the agency is committed to lifesaving cancer and tobacco cessation-related research and providing grants to statewide health systems that improve wellness throughout Oklahoma. But TSET's commitment is also firmly planted in cities and towns of all sizes by funding a variety of community-based grants that improve local health environments.

J. Tyree Today we will hear about and discuss two such grants, the Healthy Communities Incentive Grant and Healthy Schools Incentive Grant. The communities grant is designed to help cities and towns adopt and implement policies and practices for tobacco-free environments, access to healthy and nutritious foods, physical activity opportunities to improve the health and quality of life for residents. I recently attended the Oklahoma Municipal League annual conference, where I met with two officials who shared stories of how their town's incentive grants benefited its residents and visitors.

C. Howell: Yes, but let's start at the beginning with learning more about the grants themselves from the person who now administers both types of Healthy Incentive Grants.

[Cheery piano music ("[What's New](#)" by Robert Meunier)]

[01:36]

Laura Matlock: My name is Laura Matlock and I am a program officer with TSET.

C. Howell: Laura has worked with the Healthy Schools Incentive Grant for several months and now also oversees the Healthy Communities grant program.

- L. Matlock: The incentive grant funds can be used for a lot of variety of things in communities and in schools. And so when you think about the amount that a city can get, or a school can get with the incentive grants and what they can do with that money and how they can make those dollars stretch, whether it be to improve the sidewalks in a community or to provide PE equipment for the students in the classroom, those kinds of things are really instrumental in building a healthier environment for the students or the community members.
- C. Howell: That sounds great. But how does a community or a school site or district qualify for a healthy incentive grant and how, exactly, do these grants work?
- L. Matlock: So the whole point of the incentive grant is to give incentives to communities that are prioritizing the health of their citizens and their environments, and focusing on that. So we offer the incentive grants when they can prove to us and show us that they have put these policies or best practices into place. Then that is when they're eligible to apply.
- So in order to qualify, you have to have a few things in place at the district for schools or the community level for communities, and (that) would be policies implementing those best practices and policies and adopting some of those policies in their communities. Giving that broad spectrum approach of everyone that's within their environment is protected by those policies. So those policies would be covering tobacco use prevention and 24/7 tobacco policies in school districts, also work site wellness policies around physical activity and nutrition, and supporting the health of their employees and their students and staff.
- C. Howell: The application process for incentive grants is explained at tset.ok.gov, under the heading "funding opportunities." It's important to note when the application period for each grant is open.
- L. Matlock: So right now the school grants are open and they'll be open through October 1st. Then our next school grant opening will be January 3rd through February 3rd. For communities our first round for this fiscal year will be open November 1st through December 3rd. Then again in the spring, March 1st through April 1st.
- C. Howell: So schools and communities both have opportunities in the coming weeks and months to apply. These grants are designed to be accessible to everyone and flexible to each community's needs.
- L. Matlock: We have some funding to give to communities and schools, no matter the size, no matter if you have a grant writer or not. The other thing that is important for communities and schools to know is that this is not a reimbursable grant and it's not requiring any type of match. So we really are writing you a check and allowing you to spend that money and then doing a report a year later to tell us how that went and what that looks like. So having that money kind of upfront is a little bit of a different opportunity for a grant than most school districts and communities are used to receiving.

[05:00]

J. Tyree: Thank you Laura Matlock for that helpful background information.

Hey Cate, what do you say we take our podcast audience out to the beautiful and new Oklahoma City Convention Center, where the Oklahoma Municipal League's annual conference recently took place?

C. Howell: Sounds good, James. What a cool event. Wish I could be there, but it sounds like it was really hopping.

J. Tyree: It was. I think the best part was people sharing stories and experiences, which has always been your vision for this podcast. It was a joy hearing from Dr. Francis Shelton, the mayor of Boley, and Matthew Duke, the Muldrow town administrator tell how Healthy Communities Incentive Grants brought new energy and interest into their towns through new and improved parks that helped residents and visitors alike of all ages and abilities get more active.

C. Howell: Yes, bring on the stories! Let's hear first from Mayor Shelton of Boley, a small historically Black town in east central Oklahoma.

[06:07]

Dr. Francis Shelton: My name is Dr. Francis Shelton. I'm from Boley, Oklahoma, and I'm the mayor.

J. Tyree: Okay. Now I understand, Dr. Shelton, that, of course, you guys applied for a healthy community incentive grant. When was that, and what was that money used for?

Dr. Shelton: Well, it was about a year ago, and we started out with a field of trees and grass—

J. Tyree: Yeah.

Dr. Shelton: —and turned it into a park and added grow boxes to the park, as well as a walking trail, there is a basketball court there. Any number of things that encourage people to use that park. We have a few people — I think I started out weighing about 172, I'm now down to 145.

J. Tyree: Wow.

Dr. Shelton: So I know that walking is good, the park is used for walking and other people walk. Also, I became a vegetarian. Well, I've been a vegetarian, but I devoted myself to it full time. And so the park is a good place for people who are interested in a change of life to visit. Either it's in your eating habits or your walking habits and your exercise. So people are losing weight.

J. Tyree: [laughs] Very nice, very nice. Now, we talked a little bit about the garden there too.

Dr. Shelton: Yes.

J. Tyree: Was that a part of what came out of this incentive grant?

Dr. Shelton: Yes. The park was an ideal that a number of people had. And the children usually played basketball in the street on a goal that I had, and this gave them an opportunity because not only is the park there, but there's a basketball court.

J. Tyree: Okay.

Dr. Shelton: And it's the new type, we have a young lady by the name of Karen Ekuban and her husband is Ebenezer Ekuban. He's played for the Cowboys, and then for Denver, trying to think of the...

J. Tyree: Denver Broncos?

Dr. Shelton: Broncos, yes. And she is originally... She grew up in Boley. And so together we did the basketball court, there's still a number of things we plan to put in that park, but when you live in a food desert, food is very important, and so we decided to do the garden. We had okra that long and soft and we could use it.

J. Tyree: That's about like 12 inches long.

Dr. Shelton: Yes. And so we then met Micah Anderson from Langston University, from when I went to a class in Coweta, Oklahoma, which is a garden class and agriculture class. And we started that program in Boley. So we spill in over from park, to now a community garden.

J. Tyree: Wow.

Dr. Shelton: And it keeps building, it's the next step to healthy living.

J. Tyree: Yeah.

Dr. Shelton: Yes.

J. Tyree: What kind of veggies grow in the garden there?

Dr. Shelton: Right now we have black eyed peas, okra, squash, cucumbers, tomatoes, peppers. We raised cabbage, potatoes. We have a little of everything, because you don't know what a person likes, so you have to put out there something that somebody would pick. And most people in our area cook those types of foods. And it's fun to drive by that park going to work in the morning and see people in the garden, picking the food. On weekends, we have people come from out of town and go into the garden and find what they like and pick it. So it's a busy garden. People walk in the park and the kids play in the park every day, if they can. And there's a little stream that runs through the park. So I've seen children fishing off the bridge and they take stringers of bass home.

J. Tyree: Wow.

Dr. Shelton: Yes. So that's another thing that has increased, the fishing out of that little creek.

J. Tyree: And before this grant, there was no park?

Dr. Shelton: There was no park, it was just an overgrown field.

J. Tyree: Wow.

Dr. Shelton: And it blocked the view of the town. And I always could picture a park or something there where if people were traveling through, they could stop and eat a lunch, or just kind of visit Boley just a little bit longer. If you build it, they will come. That's what it turned into.

J. Tyree: Nice. Well, thank you so much, Dr. Shelton. I really, really appreciate your time, and sharing this experience in your town with people throughout the state and stuff. So thank you so much.

Dr. Shelton: You are welcome. I'm glad to have had this opportunity to talk about Boley, Oklahoma and its garden.

J. Tyree: [laughs] All right.

[11:08]

C. Howell: What an amazing example of how much of an impact these grants can have. Boley had an empty field before the incentive grant, and now it's a park that not only attracts residents and visitors with its walking trail and basketball court, it also has a garden area that produces lots of great vegetables in what was a food desert. That's what it's all about.

J. Tyree: Dr. Shelton and her story of Boley's transformation with that new park are both amazing. Now let's hear about a town that is well east of Boley in Sequoyah County near the Arkansas border.

[Calming music "[Happy News in Paper Planes](#)" by RimskyMusic]

[11:45]

J. Tyree: I got to meet a fellow named Matthew Duke. He is town administrator for the town of Muldrow. Muldrow, he told me, received a Healthy Communities Incentive Grant – they got \$36,000 – and they were able to do this just by passing ordinances related to health and wellness in their community relating to tobacco-free city-owned properties and things like that. So they had this Incentive Grant, and they were able to use the funds in

getting exercise equipment and playground equipment for the park that they have there, a very popular park. They wanted to make sure that the exercise equipment was wheelchair accessible, and they even added a toddler playground to the park. So they had equipment and things to use that was appropriate for all ages and all abilities. And apparently it was pretty popular. The park was already nice, he said. It had a walking trail already that was about a mile and a quarter, and it had other nice features, but they wanted to add this exercise equipment to pick up people's heart rates and move their limbs a little bit more, which I kind of liked. And apparently it's very popular. Not only do residents in Muldrow use the equipment, but they also attract kids and families from neighboring counties and even families from western Arkansas, he said, come in and use the park over and over.

[13:23]

C. Howell: Which is absolutely amazing, and it shows that these grants do more than just impact health—they also help boost the economy. But let's now travel across the state from the far eastern Oklahoma town of Muldrow, and all the way over to Granite in the state's southwest corner. We've heard a couple of great examples of how local communities are benefiting from TSET incentive grants, but now let's hear about the impact of a Healthy Schools Incentive Grant from someone who as dedicated her life to education.

[Uplifting music ("[Rocket Launch](#)" by Olive Musique)]

[13:55]

Listena Prickett: I'm Listena Renee Prickett and I am the retiring principal of Granite Public Schools. I worked there the last eight years as their administrator Pre-K through 12, and I'm currently working at Southwest Technology Center in Altus, but I'm also volunteering and working side by side in collaboration with upcoming TSET Grant with Granite Public Schools.

C. Howell: The school district is quite unique and the Granite community is close-knit. The school is sort of the heart of the community.

L. Prickett: Granite Public School is located in southwest Oklahoma. It's a little rural school district. It's nestled beneath the beautiful little Granite Mountains, or it's part of the Quartz Mountains. Their enrollment fluctuates, pre-K to 12. Sometimes it fluctuates between 250 to 275. Something about our little school is it was constructed from the granite rock right there from the granite quarry years and years ago. So the main building is still constructed of granite rock. We're a close-knit little community. Our community is always very supportive. They look for ways to support our little school district. Some examples are just last year, we had a full-time volunteer for the crosswalk every morning. We've had ladies volunteer just to come in and listen to the emergent readers, to help them be better in their fluency and their comprehension.

C. Howell: As wonderful as the Granite school and community already were, they saw opportunity in this incentive grant to make them even better.

L. Prickett: I really wanted the TSET grant because I kind of had a vision. So that's what we work toward was how we could effectively have it benefit our school number one, but also benefit our community because our community does use our little school building from different things to gatherings of alumni, all the way to sad funerals, to graduations, just lots of things they use our school for. So we wanted it to kind of have a dual purpose on as many things as we could.

C. Howell: So Principal Prickett successfully applied for a Healthy Schools Incentive Grant for her schools.

L. Prickett: We received the District Grant for \$15,000 and in looking at our needs, we had several. So we had a vast array of things that we applied for and received. One was due to COVID. We knew we needed a safer way for our students to drink, and so we did the water bottle filling stations, and we were able to get three of those. And we also were able to get one outside refrigerated water station because it's so hot. We're in southwest Oklahoma and we have 100 degree temps all the time, and with our kiddos out on recess, we just wanted them to be hydrated. So we were able to get that. Our custodian was so excited and he kind of built a little custom built water den, and that is all of those are still in use and will be for a long time.

Another thing that we needed a lot was sidewalks for our handicapped students and for the members of our community. We were able to do that and get them in various places on the school campus. It made our students who are in a wheelchair, feel so much more safe, and our community is able to use that when they come for our graduations, our celebrations. So we're very proud of those sidewalks.

Also, we needed PE equipment that was upgraded and innovative. So we were able to get a lot. We got things from scooters, which of course are fun, fun, fun for the little kids. We got various sizes of basketballs from pre-K all the way up to standard size. Our PE teacher was so wonderful in helping to facilitate and work with me and the others on the committee on what we needed. And those were some of the things he needed along with we needed dodge balls and kick balls. We got those. And then one of the things he was the most proud of was his various entry-level strength training. They're called plyometric boxes and they were constantly out in the gymnasium being used all the time.

C. Howell: The very grateful principal said the local impact of the incentive grant has been "huge and it's ongoing."

L. Prickett: It was just like a godsend because it affected our community and our school dually because on the sidewalk, again, it helped with the students that were in a wheelchair, and it was definitely helpful with our community when they come up for the graduations, the elementary awards assemblies, the secondary awards assemblies, the Christmas programs – they had a safe sidewalk to walk on with those with scooters,

those with wheelchairs, and those with walkers. So it impacted our community with that sidewalk, but it also impacted our students where they felt so much safer. Another thing about that is how it impacted our community – we were able to purchase or go see one of our local business people right there in Granite that poured our sidewalk and got it perfect for the wheelchairs, the ramp, all that.

[Inspiring music (“Apogee” by Musicalman)]

C. Howell: Listena spoke a little more on how the new equipment helped the kids in her school stay hydrated and embrace physical activity.

L. Prickett: The one thing that I really noticed last year as the administrator, kids drank water all the time because they could take their water bottle and fill it up. And students and teachers alike – they just drank lots more water. We also knew it was much safer in the way that they would get that water. On our PE equipment, the impact of it, I just can't even tell you enough. Kids looked forward to PE. Even the kiddos who didn't like to be active, they couldn't wait to see if they're going to do scooter day or kickball day or pyro day, or if they're going to do jumping jacks. They loved PE. So the impact of this was just huge for our little school. It is so big that it's challenged us to try to write another grant for that coming year. It's a more difficult grant, but we're looking forward to working with TSET again.

[20:37]

J. Tyree: What an amazing story!

C. Howell: It really is. She finished our conversation by saying Granite was “able to add a lot of versatility, safety and excitement at our school that is still abounding.” Talk about a healthy local environment that benefits everyone there. It's great to share better health experiences like this with our listeners.

J. Tyree: As Laura Matlock said earlier in this podcast, you are invited to visit [TSET.ok.gov](https://www.tset.ok.gov) to learn more about these grants, their criteria for approval, the application process and see the growing list of communities and school sites and districts to which TSET has already awarded healthy incentive grants.

C. Howell: And as a reminder, the final day of the fall application window for school grants is October 1, but another application period is scheduled January 3rd through February 3rd. Meanwhile, the application periods this fiscal year for Healthy Communities Incentive Grants are November 1st through December 3rd and March 1st through April 1st of 2022. And again, please visit [TSET.ok.gov](https://www.tset.ok.gov) to apply or learn more information – or to listen to previous episodes of the TSET Better Health Podcast. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter @OklahomaTSET to stay up to date.

We hope you enjoyed this episode and we invite you to join us again next month. Until then, this is Cate Howell –

J. Tyree: – and James Tyree, wishing you peace –

C. Howell: – and Better Health.

[Theme music]

[22:36]