

TSET Better Health Podcast Transcript

Episode 24: The Healthy Living Program

February 28, 2021

Summary: Take a tour through some of the inspiring stories from TSET's Healthy Living Program. Hear from coordinators Melinda Caldwell, Arianna Derr and Hillary Mead about how they're collaborating with local leaders and organizations to improve the health of their communities. New municipal tobacco policies, Cherokee Nation health partnerships and summer feeding programs for kids are just the start of how these grantees work tirelessly to transform their counties for the better.

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[Theme music]

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

Cate Howell: And this is Cate Howell, TSET podcast producer.

Today, we're shining a light on just a few of many exciting things happening around Oklahoma in the world of healthy living. These three inspiring stories are the perfect showcase for the TSET Healthy Living Program, a grant program designed to improve health across the state by making changes at the local level. Through the TSET Healthy Living Program, or HLP, lead agencies of 28 grants in 30 counties have teamed up with TSET to make their communities healthier. Today, we get to hear about some exciting work happening in Mayes, Adair and Payne Counties.

J. Tyree: That's right. But first, we should cover the basics. How does the TSET Healthy Living Program work? For that, we asked Andrew Underkoffler, a TSET program officer who works with HLP grants, to share a few details.

[01:14]

[Music: "[The Morning Glow](#)" by Chill Cord]

Andrew Underkoffler: My name is Andrew Underkoffler, and I'm a program officer for the Healthy Living Program here at TSET.

So in a nutshell, the Healthy Living Program is seeking to prevent cancer and cardiovascular disease by preventing and reducing tobacco use and obesity on a local level. Often, the underlying causes of poor health outcomes are due to circumstances outside of healthcare systems, but are actually linked to the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, learn, play, work, and age. These are our social determinants of health that can drive as much as 80% of our health outcomes.

So when I say local level, I'm talking about our hotspot region approach that we use for the Healthy Living Program. HLP grantees spent a year completing a comprehensive community needs assessment to gather local data about their communities. So this data, paired with census tract and block group data, provides an opportunity to guide conversations about what might be causing health disparities in different hotspots across those communities and how grantees can create change within those communities through program planning and investments of resources at the local level.

[02:23]

Grantees have worked with local leaders, local business, their local governments, community organizations, schools, the people of their community, and so much more in a data-driven approach to determine the best strategies for their communities and improving health outcomes. In addition to that, grantees have their own collaborative groups where they've brought people together from their community to help steer the decisions and where they'll be going with these strategies over the next five years of the grant cycle.

So grantees will have at least nine strategies that they'll be working on, some have more. These strategies work to approach our three health topic areas, tobacco, nutrition and physical activity. So these can include things like working with cities and local governments on a variety of zoning ordinances, urban design, transportation strategies that encourage active living for people of all ages, providing guidance to grocery stores and small food stores on stocking healthier options, and then of course, working to ensure tobacco-free properties and reducing youth access to tobacco.

So, we believe in local people solving local problems. Bringing those people together to identify community goals and implement change is critical and has great potential for long-term sustainability.

[03:33]

C. Howell: So, now we have more of an understanding of what the TSET Healthy Living Program is and how it works. Now, let's talk about the local impact that it's making.

J. Tyree: For an on-the-ground perspective, let's first hear from a TSET HLP coordinator in northeast Oklahoma who is working with city leaders and community partners, including Cherokee Nation, to implement a new tobacco ordinance that will leave a lasting legacy.

[04:14]

[Music: "[Tiny World](#)" by Remember The Future]

Arianna Derr: My name is Arianna Derr, and I am the local Mayes County HLP Coordinator here.

Well, I always love to start out with the statistic that I feel is so powerful, which is the three behaviors which are tobacco use, lack of physical activity, and poor nutrition. They actually contribute to four chronic diseases – heart disease, lung disease, diabetes, and cancer – that contributes to 60% of Oklahoma deaths. And so, essentially, 60% of the deaths happening here at home are preventable.

[04:52]

I love how TSET often says, “We work to make the healthy choice the easy choice.” And so, oftentimes, if there's tobacco users, if there's a tobacco ordinance in place – let's say, at a football game – those adults are unable to use the tobacco products in front of the kids. And so that's super important for the culture because we know if they use tobacco in front of the kids and at different events, community events, sporting events, it can create a culture to normalize tobacco use. And so it's so important to be able to have these policies in place and enforce them so that that culture of unhealthy behaviors can be turned around.

I know, oftentimes, especially in rural Oklahoma, its small towns are very protective, and so it can seem like we're outsiders coming in, trying to change their culture. That's why it's so, so important to build those relationships with people in the community. And so that means supporting their community events, going to their council meetings, really reaching out to them, and not always reaching out to them to want something from them, but to really genuinely care about them and care about what's going on in their community. And when you can build that trust and relationships, it's very surprising how much impact that can have in passing policy and ordinances.

[06:13]

We have some exciting things happening. It's definitely been years in the making of trying to create this culture change, but it's been hopeful along the way because there was one community in particular that when they implemented this tobacco-free ordinance, of course, there's the 1-800 quitline that, actually, a lot of employees took advantage of, which was super encouraging. And in addition to that, in the ordinance, it shares that there could be tobacco cessation classes. And so we're fortunate over here in Mayes County to have the Cherokee Nation – they actually offer that service. And so we were able to connect them, those employees, with that tobacco cessation class, and some employees actually took advantage of that class. And so that was super encouraging to see that this ordinance, the result of it was people wanting to really quit and go on that journey. So that was super awesome.

So there's just been such great work done because of the tobacco-free ordinance that has also opened doors and other opportunities for the community to become healthier.

[07:14]

C. Howell: Changing the local ordinances can have cultural and generational impact, as Arianna explained, but sometimes local residents see the lasting changes with items as simple as

signs and paint! A TSET HLP coordinator in Adair County in far eastern Oklahoma shares with us how changing an environment can change lives.

[07:39]

[Music: [“The Long Way”](#) by Grace Mesa]

Hillary Mead: My name is Hillary Mead, and I am a Cherokee Nation supervisor and also the program coordinator for the TSET Healthy Living program.

Cherokee Nation has had a good relationship with schools and community centers within Adair County, and I think that that's what has really helped us when we worked in our last grant cycle and we were able to pass wellness policies with all of our schools within Adair County. And I think that was beneficial, because that was based on the relationships we had previously through Cherokee Nation's previous work of the school health programs that are offered in our schools. So we've already built that relationship that definitely they had trust in us and they were ready to move forward with any policy work that we had brought to them.

[08:30]

The high obesity program was offered in both Adair and Muskogee counties. And I know that they came in and we were able to help them gather their baseline data, because they were working on similar projects, such as Safe Routes to School and Complete Streets and trying to connect places to healthy options, such as walking trails and to healthy food options. And so it really helped us when we got to our implementation efforts. We had already, like I said, gathered that baseline data around the schools. We had worked on policy work with our schools and our city governments for Complete Streets and Safe Routes to School, which allowed them to move forward with implementation efforts, such as buying materials for us.

So some of those things that they were able to do was come in and bring in speed bumps and paint for crosswalks. In our park systems, I know they've signed some park benches and trash receptacles and done some paints and stencils. Also signage, signage was another big one that they got to help us with, and really help with flow of traffic that are through our schools and their pick-up and drop-off zones.

[09:45]

What they did with the stencils and the paint, we worked on doing playscapes at our park systems. So we've done them in Stilwell and in Westville, and just made areas where kids could come and play. Didn't necessarily need a ball or equipment or anything like that. There was a playscape that was painted directly on the pavement or the cement that they could use, and they could play, make games with and play that way.

So looking back, obviously, that I talked a lot about the Safe Routes to School projects, that's always been a passion of mine, always something that I've loved working with city

governments on, and to see that come to life in Stilwell and in Westville has been amazing to watch.

[10:36]

J. Tyree: It can be difficult to have a healthy diet for anyone living with food insecurity. That's why the TSET HLP of Payne County teamed up with Our Daily Bread, an affiliate of the Regional Food Bank, to help increase access to nutritional food for members of their community.

[10:59]

[Music: "[Brave Young Soul](#)" by Bridget Barkan]

Melinda Caldwell: I am Melinda Caldwell. I am the TSET Healthy Living Program Coordinator for Payne County, officed out of Stillwater – go Pokes!

So what's really exciting for me as a public health advocate is to see how the Healthy Living Program really takes an evidence-based sustainable and environmental approach looking at macro-level changes. So we work a lot with policy and environmental change really surrounding tobacco prevention, increasing access to healthy foods and increasing opportunities for physical activity. We've worked with a wide array of partners throughout the years to improve availability and affordability of local foods. So, that could look something like working with schools to update their nutrition policies. It could be workplace wellness policies that include nutritional components in that to make healthier options available for local community members.

[12:00]

So shortly after Our Daily Bread was created, our local food and resource center, we formed a great partnership with them. And we were really looking at our data as far as in Payne County and SNAP. (SNAP is Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Other people may know it as EBT or formerly known as food stamps.) So we saw that we didn't have a high percentage of the population that was eligible for SNAP that was receiving SNAP. So we had partnered with Our Daily Bread to start having SNAP signups among their clientele. And it started out as just, you know, a once a month thing, but as we were able to build a buy-in and we saw that there was a need, fast-forward to now, where it's been an initiative of Our Daily Bread. We've brought different partners in such as the Regional Food Bank to host trainings for volunteers in Payne County, as well as DHS has held trainings as well. That SNAP is now a question on their intake for clients – they ask if a community member receives SNAP, and then they now are planning to have SNAP signups at every single session.

[13:18]

We had a lot of people really come to us and were so thankful that the service was being provided – it's almost a dual service: they could get their groceries, and while

they're waiting to get groceries, sign up for SNAP as well – and how much it truly helped their family.

You know, public health work – it takes time. You know, large, sustainable changes take time. They don't happen overnight. And so to see throughout my time in Payne County how the passing of a policy has truly affected a community or, you know, how sidewalks have affected a community – it's really exciting to see those things happen.

[13:56]

C. Howell: The stories we've heard today cross all the way from central Oklahoma to the eastern border. These TSET HLP coordinators and their community partners have helped change laws and policies, improve infrastructure for wellness and increase healthy food access for their communities – and that's only three of our 28 total grantees.

J. Tyree: The first round of TSET HLP grants were awarded in 2015, and since then, more than two thousand wellness and tobacco-free policies have been adopted across the state, which affect more than one million Oklahoma adults and youth. As the second five-year cycle continues until 2025, we're already seeing remarkable impact that's changing lives.

[14:47]

If you would like to learn more about the TSET Healthy Living Program, or any of our grant programs, please visit our website at tset.ok.gov. Click on TSET Programs and then on Healthy Lifestyle grants to learn more and find contact information for every TSET HLP grant.

C. Howell: And be sure to check out more of our podcast episodes while you're there at tset.ok.gov/podcast, and follow us on social media @OklahomaTSET to stay up to date.

J. Tyree: We'd like to extend a sincere thank you to all of our dedicated TSET HLP coordinators and their community partners throughout the state, and especially to the three coordinators who joined us today along with TSET program officer Andrew Underkoffler. And we thank you, our listeners, for joining us today. So, until next time, this is James Tyree –

C. Howell: And Cate Howell –

J. Tyree: Wishing you peace –

C. Howell: – and Better Health.

[Theme music]

[16:13]