

## TSET Better Health Podcast Transcript

### Episode 28: Nutrition on a Budget: Eating Healthy in Food Deserts

June 20, 2022

Summary: We all know that eating well-balanced nutritious meals is important for energy and good health. But that can be difficult for Oklahomans who rely on dollar and convenience stores for their groceries because they lack access to faraway supermarkets. Fortunately, families and individuals can shop for healthy foods at smaller stores, and this episode's guests provide resources, strategies, and services available to help. Pat Dehart, a diabetes educator nurse, walks us through what healthy options are available in dollar and convenient stores. Lydia Kelley, executive director of Loaves & Fishes, details the services her client-choice food pantry provides, who can qualify, and why it's so meaningful. And Dylan Jasna, new member of the TSET Health Communication team, shares the wealth of resources available through Shape Your Future, a healthy lifestyle promotion program of TSET.

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#### **[Theme music]**

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

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

We all want to live healthy lives – eat healthy, exercise, and steer clear of unhealthy behaviors like smoking. But even though it seems like a straightforward concept, there are myriad factors at play that create obstacles to these goals. Today, we're going to take a look at the reality of nutrition in rural and low-income areas. We're going to explore why it's especially difficult for people living in these areas to eat healthy and share some resources available to help.

#### **[00:43]**

J. Tyree: That's right, Cate. Our first guest interviewed all the way from Camden, New Jersey, to discuss an important health topic that hits close to home – healthy shopping and eating on a budget for people with diabetes – and really for all of us. Then, we travel back to north central Oklahoma to visit and learn about Loaves & Fishes, a unique and expansive food pantry that serves largely rural populations. And finally, we welcome TSET's newest health communication manager to share all the resources available through our healthy lifestyle program, Shape Your Future.

#### **[01:30]**

**[“Pulse of Life” by Peter McIsaac Music]**

But first, how do we prevent diabetes and other malnutrition-related diseases if we don't even have access to a grocery store with healthy produce? Well, to share some strategies and insights, I spoke with Pat Dehart a registered nurse and certified diabetes educator nurse.

Pat Dehart: Well, I'm a nurse and I've graduated in 1977, which means I've been in different phases of nursing for 45 years. I started out with my career with OB/GYN nursing for many years, and then I went to work for a pharmaceutical company for 25 years in sales and marketing and account management. One of the fields of interest was launching drugs to treat diabetes. After I retired from that job, I went ahead and I secured a position as a certified diabetes educator nurse, and what that means is, I see patients who primarily have Type 2 diabetes, and help them to change their lifestyle and eat healthier. That sparked my interest in really getting more information on how people can change their lives, even on a low budget, and eat healthier.

**[02:50]**

J. Tyree: Pat's areas of expertise are especially needed where she works and sees clients.

P. Dehart: So, the area that I work in is considered what is known as a food desert. There are no grocery stores in Camden, New Jersey. However, there were seven Dollar Stores, five of those, which had frozen food sections. When I realized that my patients were really running out of money, either if they were on food stamps, the last week, or they just lived in a lower income area where they didn't have access to a grocery store, I thought about perhaps going on a shopping visit with the dietician that was also working there at the time and coming up with a food plan that we could pass out to our patients, so they could know not only how to shop, but also the portions that they need to eat in order to stay healthy.

**[03:49]**

J. Tyree: As it turns out, there are a number of nutritious food options available at dollar and convenience stores.

P. Dehart: There's so many selections at the Dollar Store, especially those stores that have both a refrigerated and a frozen section. They have a wide variety of vegetables that they can access because of the frozen food section, and they have other healthy selections like peanut butter and apple sauce and eggs. There are, although there are more processed items in a dollar store, this gives you an opportunity at least, to make some healthy purchases so that you can improve your health.

**[04:29]**

You can keep in mind that even these small mom and pop stores, they always have items like beans and tuna fish, peanut butter. They may often have vegetables, canned, even though they're lower sodium now than they've been before, we do recognize that when you shop in these stores, that the foods are more processed and have more salt

than you would optimally like, but it does afford them an opportunity to go and shop and make some healthy selections.

J. Tyree: It's encouraging to know that while dollar and small stores lack large selection of healthy foods, they do often have a variety of nutritious items if we know where to look. It helps to think ahead and strategically and sometimes that can be as simple – and effective – as a well-planned grocery list.

**[05:27]**

P. Dehart: I think the key is planning. One of the things that I provided in the article was a shopping list, and I had a menu for seven days, three meals a day and snacks. The key to good health and the key to healthy eating and selection is planning. So, before you go to the store, think about what meals you're going to make over the next couple of days. List those items, and stick to those items that you need in order to accomplish those meals. That is the key. Planning is the key.

**[06:00]**

**[[“Neverwhere”](#) by Celine Love]**

J. Tyree: In addition to learning what nutritious options are available at grocery stores, there are some organizations and services designed to fill the gaps in rural food deserts. In particular, we were pleased to learn more about Loaves & Fishes, a client-choice-style food pantry based in Enid and serving ten counties in Northwest Oklahoma.

Lydia Kelley: I'm Lydia Kelley, I'm the executive director of Loaves & Fishes of Northwest Oklahoma, here in Enid, Oklahoma.

J. Tyree: Loaves & Fishes is a wonderful and unique organization. They're not like every other food pantry – they're a 'client-choice' pantry, as Lydia explains.

**[06:51]**

L. Kelley: So, Loaves & Fishes is a client-choice food pantry. We distribute food to those who are in need of our services and those who need grocery assistance. We are a little bit different from regular food pantries because we do follow the client choice model, which means instead of handing somebody a box full of shelf-stable food items and sending them on their way, the clients who visit us come into our pantry and shop, much like they would at a regular grocery store. They get to pick out the items they would like to take home and decide what they can enjoy with their families. We also have a wide variety of fresh produce, and meat, and dairy items, in addition to just self shelf-stable items.

We serve Garfield, Alfalfa, Blaine, Grant, Kay. A little bit of Kingfisher, a little bit of Logan. Major, Noble and Woods. Right now, we're averaging about 600 families and individuals a month. That means, that's the number of people visiting our pantry, who are taking that home to their households.

**[07:56]**

Usually we have a large variety. We really aim to have a large, wide variety of items, especially the fresh items. In addition to just our pantry, we do have a 4,000 square-foot learning and production garden called Faith Farm, and we are currently in the growing season with them. So, we have a group of volunteers who go out twice a week and will collect the harvest from that, which can be anything from lettuce, to radishes, to cabbages, to carrots. So, we like to be able to offer that to our clients and tell them that we grew this at our farm. Additionally, the Regional Food Bank provides a lot of fresh produce. Generally we get apples and oranges, at the very least, from them. And just whatever else they may have available.

J. Tyree: The Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma is a crucial partner with Loaves & Fishes, providing valuable resources and services to ensure widespread reach and fresh produce.

**[08:50]**

L. Kelley: The Regional Food Bank is a great relationship that we have. We are a partner agency through them, and we do get a lot of the food that we have through our partnership with them.

We also have a great partnership that is set up through the Regional Food Bank, with two local Walmarts, and the commissary on Vance Air Force Base. The program is called Retail Recovery. So four days a week, we go out with our box truck and pick up from those locations. And we pick up items that they may not be able to still have on their shelves. But are still perfectly good food items and are still completely appropriate for human consumption. This includes a lot of ugly produce, that maybe it's been out for a few days and they got a new shipment of it, or something like that. But we will get that produce and we'll bring it back to our building, and sort it out, and make sure it gets in our cooler, available for our clients.

**[09:45]**

J. Tyree: Additionally, Kelley says people are often surprised to learn that they qualify for this kind of assistance, and if more people simply knew, maybe we could increase the amount of nutritious food options for people who need it.

L. Kelley: I also think a lot of people don't think they'll qualify for our services. They think perhaps they make too much money. And in my opinion, the income guidelines are quite high. For a single person household, the maximum amount of income they can make to still qualify would be \$25,760 a year. That's a decent wage, you know? But people are still not making enough to get by.

**[10:26]**

[[“Seasons of Change”](#) by Elliot Middleton]

Most of the stories that stick with me are the really heartwarming ones. The client choice model, which I absolutely love, I'm a big fan of it. The main goal of it is to promote dignity for the clients that come in. They're empowered to make the decisions with what they take home. And I, personally, was shopping with a client one time, and we were going through the pantry. And she was so excited, because the first item that we came upon to load her cart up with, was apples. And she said, "My three grandsons live with me. They love apples, and these are growing boys." And I have two boys myself, so I certainly understand that they can eat a lot. So she grabbed a whole bunch of apples, and she said, "Well, how many can I have?" And I said, "You can have as many as you'll be able to use." She said, "Oh, oh, that's wonderful."

So we went through the pantry and she grabbed a bunch of other stuff. And it was her first time and she was just so excited to see all the produce, see that we had milk and eggs, and she was able to get some ground beef in our freezer, which she was very excited about. And the absolute last shelf we have in our pantry is a dessert shelf, and while we do definitely promote healthy options, and we have a lot of healthy options, we still want people to get a little treat before they leave, and it's great for kids and families.

**[11:46]**

So one of the things on the dessert shelf was a caramel apple making kit. And she just, she almost teared up. She was so excited. I think it was around Halloween. And she was just excited that she and her grandsons were going to be able to do this together, and be able to make these caramel apples together. And she said, "This is never something I would buy, or even think to buy." She said, "But I think I'm going to get that."

And that story just... It's really stuck with me. It's just very heartwarming. She was just so excited. And I love that. And that's part of why we do the client choice model, is because we want people to just be happy to be here and not feel ashamed to come in, or feel like they're just sticking their hand out, asking to give us whatever you can give us. They get to pick what they get. And I don't know that that story is particularly outstanding or anything, but it's just always been a good one to me.

**[12:50]**

**["Jazzy Beat" by Life Is an Epic Film]**

- C. Howell: TSET is deeply invested in increasing nutrition access to all Oklahomans regardless of geography or economic status. That's part of the mission of Shape Your Future. We asked the newest member of the TSET Health Communication team to walk us through what Shape Your Future is and why it's so necessary.
- Dylan Jasna: I'm Dylan Jasna. I'm a health communication manager with TSET.
- D. Jasna: So I was born and raised in Southeastern Oklahoma in Sequoyah County. I got my journalism degree from the University of Oklahoma. I started my career out as a TV

news producer for 2 News Oklahoma in Tulsa. I spent a couple years there. I actually won an Emmy for my 30 minute special on the opioid crisis in Oklahoma. And then I moved on and became a TV producer in Phoenix for CBS 5 and 3TV. I worked there for a few years. I won another Emmy for my breaking news. And then I started to look and the pandemic hit. And I thought when I got into journalism, I really wanted to make a difference. That's really the goal of every journalist and I one day just decided I'm not doing enough. So I saw a job opening back here at home for the Oklahoma state department of health, for their public information officer position down in Southeast Oklahoma, where I'm from. I was lucky enough to get that position, which started my career in public health. I learned a lot there. And then I've transitioned now to TSET as a health communication manager. So that's where I'm at today.

**[14:35]**

C. Howell: And we're so lucky and grateful to have him. Since starting at TSET in early 2022, Dylan has taken on our Shape Your Future campaign. We've talked about it on the show before, but I'll let Dylan break it down.

D. Jasna: So unfortunately, Oklahoma is one of the top 10 states in America with the highest poverty rate. You can see it really across the state, but especially in rural parts of the state. People in low income communities often don't have that access to convenient places that offer affordable healthier foods. Think of going down to the Walmart down the street or the Whole Foods.

**[15:18]**

So when those healthy options aren't available, people may settle for foods that are higher in calories and low and nutritional value. Diets high in these types of foods can lead to chronic diseases, including obesity, diabetes, a whole list of issues that we at TSET are trying to tackle as best as we can. Oklahoma also has some of the highest child and adult obesity rates in the nation.

So Shape Your Future, which is a program part of TSET, we strive to educate Oklahomans on ways to eat better, move more, drink water, and be tobacco free. What's great about this program – we try to help people across Oklahoma. So rural Oklahomans, Oklahomans who don't have access to transportation or funds to buy that healthy food, we try to make it as easy as possible for people to live a healthier lifestyle. We provide resources for parents, children, teachers, businesses, anyone you can think of who lives, works in Oklahoma, just to help them make healthier choices that are easy to do.

**[16:31]**

**[“[Elevation](#)” by Styve Bolduc]**

C. Howell: Sounds great! But how do we do that exactly?

D. Jasna: We have dedicated recipes that are budget friendly and can be made in 20 minutes or less. So we know parents are busy, we're all busy. We know that it's easy to run down the street and get fast food, but that is not nutritional, and it's fueling the obesity epidemic here in Oklahoma.

So a big tool, and especially just starting here, I was amazed at how many recipes that are actually really good and easy to make that are on our Shape Your Future website. When I think of healthy food and trying to cook healthy food, I think it's expensive. I need all these ingredients. It's going to take me all day to cook, and that's just not the case, especially with our recipes that we have. Recently, we've added a blog on tips on how to choose healthy options at local dollar stores, tips to save money and time by using frozen fruits and veggies, plus tips for healthy meals and snacks, you can grab from most gas stations. So that is a very awesome blog that's on our website right now that people can go check out to just make simple everyday choices to have a healthier lifestyle and really combat those chronic diseases that high calorie, low nutritional foods cause such as obesity and diabetes.

**[18:04]**

There's also an abundance of interactive, healthy resources available on our website, including free meal plans, grocery lists and more. We encourage you and your family to check them out and share them with others. You can find us on all social media platforms, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook at Shape Your Future OK. And you can also find Shape Your Future on Pinterest as well.

I feel like I can say that as also an outsider looking in, since I am so new to this position that the work here that we are doing is so important to Oklahomans. And I'm just, I'm really excited to share as much of these resources as I can with everyone.

**[18:50]**

C. Howell: There are plenty of legitimate reasons why maintaining a healthy lifestyle is difficult, and many are beyond our capability to address as individuals. From dealing with poverty and economic barriers to simple geographic accessibility, a lot of work must be done on a systemic level to ensure equal access to nutritional food nationwide. That said, the United States is facing a serious public health epidemic with the rise of obesity and related diseases, and Oklahoma is struggling worse than other states. Not only does it lessen the quality of life for the people who live here, but it puts an undue burden on our already overtaxed medical system and creates astronomical expense for the state. That's why we shouldn't wait for the system to change around us before we start taking our health seriously. That's why we should do what we can with the resources we have now, even if those resources are limited for many of us.

**[19:50]**

J. Tyree: Indeed. You know, as we've explored in today's episode, there are many helpful tips to making the most out of what we have, even if we're working on a budget with limited

access to a major supermarket. A person or family can check into getting nutritious food at their local food pantry, like Loaves & Fishes. Oklahomans who don't live near a grocery store can still find healthy foods by shopping strategically at a local dollar or convenient store. And, of course, you can go online to ShapeYourFutureOK.com and find a ton of valuable resources to help you plan healthy meals within your budget.

C. Howell: If you'd like more helpful tips and information from us, check out additional Better Health episodes at [tset.ok.gov/podcast](http://tset.ok.gov/podcast), and be sure to follow us on Facebook and Twitter @OklahomaTSET.

J. Tyree: We'd like to extend our sincere gratitude to our three wonderful guests, and to you, our listeners, for tuning in today. Until next time, this is James Tyree –

C. Howell: And Cate Howell –

J. Tyree: Wishing you peace –

C. Howell: – and Better Health.

[Theme music]

**[21:21]**