

TSET Better Health Podcast Transcript

Episode 6: TSET Community Impact

August 14, 2020

Summary: The TSET Healthy Living Program (HLP) and its coordinators have transformed communities across Oklahoma. Join James and Cate as they travel the state to share first-person perspectives of these grant-funded initiatives:

Muskogee has used the TSET HLP to implement vast changes from complete streets, childhood nutrition, community gardens and wellness in the workplace. The coordinator in Newkirk helped city leaders and advocates secure a large grant to connect the community through safe sidewalks. Cleveland County has made immense progress in increasing nutritional food access in rural areas, which not only improves the health of residents but also supports local farmers. Prague Elementary School has reimagined what education can be with the help of TSET HLP coordinators by incorporating physical activity into the learning process.

TSET HLP coordinators work with community leaders to implement strategic projects that create generational change. Tune in to learn more about TSET's impact on the lives of everyday Oklahomans.

[Theme music]

[0:15]

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

Cate Howell: And this is Cate Howell, health communication intern at TSET.

James: And today, we are going to discuss the community impact – the impact that is felt statewide with TSET's community-based grants.

As many of you know, TSET's mission is to lower the rates of cancer and cardiovascular disease throughout Oklahoma by decreasing rates of tobacco use and obesity. This is done primarily by giving grants in various capacities: grants for cancer research, grants for statewide health systems initiatives, but also community-based grant programs.

Cate: One thing that I think is really unique to TSET and something that I don't think a lot of people know is that our reach stretches way far beyond just this Oklahoma City office because of these grant programs. One example of this is the TSET Healthy Living Program, which has 35 grants throughout the state that help transform wellness in their local communities.

James: That's true, that is so very true. You know, the coordinators who work within the TSET Healthy Living Program – they do their work at the local level, right? And they do this by working with community partners who, together, work on policy, sustainable policy that

increases access to nutritional foods and physical activity and also prohibits tobacco use in public areas so people are able to breathe in cleaner air, and it just really boosts the health of citizens all over the place.

Cate: See, and that's incredible. We have coordinators who are working with community leaders all over the state just to improve the wellness of the entire state through these measures. And wellness is especially important right now because of this COVID-19 pandemic. Because we've seen that tobacco use increases the likelihood of severe outcomes of COVID-19. Obesity increases the likelihood of severe outcomes and COVID-19. Lack of physical activity increases the likelihood of severe outcomes of COVID-19. And this is what TSET is all about, is trying to make Oklahoman citizens healthier through acts of prevention like this.

So, today, we're going to hear from our fabulous HLP coordinators and some community partners in this episode, but first we're going to talk to TSET Program Officer Jessica Davis, and she is going to give us an overview of this Healthy Living Program.

James: Sounds good. Let's listen now.

[3:09]

James: Hey Jessica, it is good to see you, and I'm glad that you're able to talk for a couple minutes about the new cycle of the TSET Healthy Living Program. A lot of people in Oklahoma are kind of familiar with it because it had been around for five years, but can you tell us a little bit, generally speaking, what the TSET Healthy Living Program is, especially with this new five-year cycle coming up?

Jessica Davis: Thank you, James. TSET has funded community-based grants since 2004. Our new TSET Healthy Living Program builds upon the original Healthy Living Program initiative that was launched in 2015. This grant is focused on areas within a county where the poorest health outcomes exist. The health outcomes may be related to low life expectancy, it may be related to cancer, morbidity and mortality, and things like that. So really, this grant takes a look at the data that's attributed to those health outcomes and really just examines 'why do these poor health outcomes exist within a community?' And then once they kind of figure out the 'why' behind the story, they're able to select strategies related to tobacco use and obesity that would be a really good fit to overcome the identified obstacles and barriers related to poor health within the county.

James: So there are like 35 of these grants this time around, so it sounds like, with what you just said, it won't be a cookie-cutter approach. Each grant will do what they need to based on what they find out locally?

Jessica: That's correct. We realized that every county is unique and we really want them to identify what the problems are within those counties. They're going to be working in what we call hot spots. So those are those identified areas where there may be lower life expectancy, as I previously said, and they're going to really select, you know, strategies that align with why are people having problems accessing healthy food, or

why do people not go outside and use the trails or walk within their community. There may be some barriers that are preventing them from doing so. So we're really looking at that, and grantees, along with collaborative group members and partners, are going to see what strategies would best help communities overcome those identified barriers.

James: You know, as you are very well aware, TSET – we have grant programs for research, cancer research, there are statewide grants – why is it important for us to also have community-based grants?

Jessica: Well, community-based grants are important because they really take a look at the population as a whole within a community. We're not focused on working one by one with individuals to help assist with poor health outcomes. We're really looking at groups of people in order to solve the problems, and we know that funding community grants is important because we know that local people help solve local problems. You can't necessarily have somebody from the state tell people what the problems are within their communities. The community knows their problems the best and the best solutions to solve those problems that they find.

James: All right. Thank you very much. Well, take care, Jess.

Jessica: Thank you so much for having me today.

[6:29]

James: You know, we traveled across Oklahoma to get perspectives from our community members. We had a lot of fun doing that over the past few days, didn't we?

Cate: Yes, we did.

James: And you'll get to hear some of our experiences and the people that we talked to throughout this podcast. Let's go first to Muskogee where I met up with TSET Healthy Living Program Coordinators Doug Walton and Angel Tillman, and also with Craig McNeill with DalTile, a plant there in Muskogee, who were all eager to tell us about the exciting changes happening there to improve the wellness of the people and employees in that area.

[7:09]

James: Alright, we are in Muskogee here, and we are here with Doug Walton and Angel Tillman with the TSET Healthy Living Program in Muskogee County, and they're also with the Muskogee County Health Department, which is the lead agency for the Healthy Living Program in this county. Now, until COVID arrived, which of course changes everything, how would you describe the state of wellness in the Muskogee area? What are the strengths, and what were some areas that need improvement, just generally speaking?

Doug Walton: James, thanks for coming to Muskogee, by the way. It's good to have you here.

Probably our greatest strengths right now are physical activity levels in the county. As far as the data both for leisure time physical activity and aerobic physical activity, better than the state average. Still room for improvement, but those are probably the – sort of the best indicators that we've got. We're still – we've got a long way to go on obesity rates, smoking prevalence and, really, diet-related chronic conditions.

Angel Tillman: I have some childcares that are still working on their gardens throughout the pandemic. They are still working with their gardens and eating healthy, and they're still feeding the children that they're serving healthier meals from the foods from the gardens. And that was a plus. I was excited to get those pictures and find out that they're still working with their gardens. So, the healthy eating is still taking place, physical activity is still taking place, and also the tobacco-free environments. Gospel Rescue Mission has gone completely 100% tobacco-free. They're a tobacco-free campus as of January 1, 2020. So, organizations in Muskogee, I think they're doing great.

Doug: James, I'd say one of the policies I'm most proud of is the City of Muskogee's Complete Streets policy passed in 2016. After several years working with the city and our AIM infrastructure committee, Action in Muskogee committee, to really look at some of the kind of best policies around the nation and draw from those, and then, in fact, in 2017, the City of Muskogee's policy was named within the top 10 Complete Streets policies in the nation by the Complete Streets Coalition. It actually tied for number four. So we were really, really happy about that, and the city has embraced it. You know, we've helped develop some implementation checklists; we've added a lot of on-street bike ways and new trail projects that have been funded and are under construction right now, sidewalks. So, we think the work getting it in place has paid off, and we're really proud of that one.

James: That's tremendous. I mean, that's a really big deal, and, as you mentioned, sometimes it can take a while before things happen.

Angel: I am really excited about the resolution that the Healthy Food Retail Task Force has passed, and we had it approved through the City of Muskogee, and that's one of the things we have accomplished as well.

James: So what does that entail?

Doug: Basically, the resolution was the city dating the importance of access to healthy foods and formed a task force that came together, multi-agencies from throughout the city and the county, really to look at the barriers to healthy food access, to increase awareness about programs such as SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) acceptance at the farmers market, increasing the availability of fresh produce through community pantries and meal programs, putting together a resource guide that lists all of those, and actually helping the city to apply for grant funding to build a new sidewalk between a public housing project and nearby convenience store, and so it's really been another example of something we're quite proud of.

James: Very good. Now, as of July 1 of this year, at the start of this new fiscal year, Muskogee and other grantees throughout the state have started a new five-year cycle of the TSET Healthy Living Program. So, going forward, what are you looking forward to in terms of maybe areas of emphasis for reducing obesity rates, tobacco use and such?

Doug: Sure, yeah. Well, we're really excited about the new assessment tools that TSET has developed and the data that they've gathered at the county level, and actually, at the census tract level and even within census tracts within census blocks. We're able to now see several different sort of indexes. There's an area of deprivation index that sort of puts together a lot of things, poverty and education, and access to healthy foods, and all of those into an index that we can use at those geographies.

So we've identified, initially, several census tracts within the City of Muskogee that have lower-than-average life expectancy, and the Child Opportunity Index – I've never heard of it before – and it pulls together a number of different variables that looks at children's health and basically welfare within a region, and so we have several in Muskogee that have very low Child Opportunity Indexes. We have a collaborative group that we've assembled and are still adding to that's going to help us really kind of hone in and identify which of those are sort of the greatest priority. We have a lot of areas in need, and we know we probably can't work with all of them initially, and so we're going to be looking forward to getting the input from our other partners on that.

James: You're doing a lot of good work with kids and schools and with communities – you mentioned Complete Streets – and also businesses, of course: we've got Craig here from DalTile. How important or why is it important to also work with the business sector in your work?

Doug: Well, several reasons, really. I mean, these are the places where the people who live in Muskogee – you know, employers are where they spend most of their waking hours, and so having employers who understand the importance of providing an environment that supports healthy options and allows their employees to have choices is really critical and crosses the entire community.

James: Craig McNeill here from DalTile: I've heard you speak before and present before, make it your business in Tulsa and I think another place as well, with the work that you've done in terms of improving wellness for employees there. Is there a particular experience or a story of someone who's really benefited greatly from the wellness policies that you've had in correlation with the Healthy Living Program?

Craig McNeill: Sure. Absolutely. Some of those were really at the beginning when we implemented tobacco-free policy, which is one of our strengths. We know from sort of collecting stories that we've had team members make the struggle to quit using tobacco. Sometimes they relapse, sometimes they struggle again, but it's – specifically, we've had employees that doubted that tobacco-free policy was for the benefit of them, that it was – they really believe that was only for the benefit of the company and there was nothing in it for them, and when they finally made the decision that it really was that we were caring about them as employees and they made the decision to engage in quitting using tobacco, they then also got family members to quit using tobacco, perhaps in that

household or children in that household or adult children that might be using tobacco also to quit using tobacco in their families. And so that has multiplied the effect that we have with those people who have become serious about quitting use. Other times, we've had employees that have quit but their spouse doesn't quit, and then their spouse quits but they don't quit, and so they're having that struggle in their families and we're able to offer support for them. Even though we're not successful, they may just be quitting at work. So for the 12 hours that they're there working their shift three and a half days a week, they're not using tobacco because that's ... for themselves, and it's reduced what they're doing versus what they would have otherwise. We know that that's happened, too.

James: Very good. Thank you very much. We appreciate your time here in lovely Muskogee, USA.

[15:12]

Cate: Wow, that is so much that's happening in just one county. I mean, you talked about Complete Streets, talked about childhood nutrition, community gardens, and wellness in the workplace, collaborating with business leaders. That's incredible.

James: You know, Muskogee has made great strides in all of these areas, and it shows how much a community can transform into becoming a healthier place.

Now, I know that you traveled to the very northern end of Oklahoma to the town of Newkirk.

Cate: I certainly did. That was a great trip, great experience. I spoke with City Manager Jane Thomas and TSET HLP Coordinator Jenny Creech about how they worked together with other community advocates to secure a (T-A-P) TAP grant to connect the city through walking paths. So they're going to explain a little bit about what that means and how that's going to really help out their community.

[16:12]

Cate: Hello, listeners. We are here today with Jane Thomas, the city manager of Newkirk, Oklahoma, and Jenny Creech, the TSET Healthy Living Program coordinator for Kay County. So, ladies, thank you so much for joining me today. Would you mind first just telling me a little bit about yourselves and how you got involved with TSET, Jenny, and then how you got involved with the city?

Jane Thomas: Jenny first or Jane first?

Cate: Either one.

Jenny Creech: [laughs] I'll go first.

So, I have been the TSET Healthy Living Program coordinator for Kay County for five years. So, from the beginning of the very first Healthy Living Program grant, I've been there. And I live in Ponca City, I'm a Kay County resident, and I have two little boys.

Jane: And I'm Jane Thomas. I've been the city manager for four years for the City of Newkirk, and I was always looking for health and fitness for the city of Newkirk, and something – it started out that it was just for the kids, but it's involved from 8 to 80 now, so me and Jenny got connected and put our heads together.

Jenny: We actually started talking about different things, and with her approach on health and wellness for the community, one of the things that got up was the TSET Healthy Communities Incentive Grant. And so that's actually how I kind of got in the door with her, and then I was able to explain our program, what we do, and then what the incentive grant does, and Jane pulled out this picture of a walking path and she goes, "Would this – would that grant help with this?" And I was like, "Heck yeah, it would! Where'd you get this? Where did this come from?" That started everything, and Jane and I have developed a wonderful relationship over the last four years.

Jane: Yeah.

Cate: Can you, one of you or both of you, tell me a little bit about what a TAP grant is exactly, like what is that acronym?

Jane: Transportation Alternative Program. So, it's transportation without vehicles, normal cars –

Jenny: Non-motorized transportation.

Jane: Non-motorized. You can walk. You can bike, roller skate, skateboard, anything, but not – non-motorized vehicles.

Cate: Well, let's talk about this walking path. How did that happen?

Jane: Actually, a young lady by the name of Hannah Cross came to interview me for – I believe it was a Girl Scout project to start with. She was 10 when this started. She's 13 now. We hit it off just like me and Jenny did, and she was wanting to know my ideas and what we need to do in the city, and I said, "Well, I'd really love to fix up Lions Park and make it a walking path and have it where all the kids could enjoy it, and the adults, and things like that." And the youth program was already working on the baseball field. So, next thing when I met with Hannah, she brought me this map here. So, this is how we started. It was like 1.7 miles. And she even put, like, in green the good sidewalk and in red the bad sidewalk.

Jenny: She had done a walkability audit before she even knew what a walkability audit was.

Jane: Yes. So then, me and Jenny got together, and Hannah and Hannah's mother, and we started thinking about how we could do this project. And we knew about the TAP grant, and we knew about TSET. So, we were waiting for the TAP to open again.

Jenny: We waited for a year. So, we had started things in the fall of 2017. It doesn't seem like that long ago. [laughs]

Jane: I know.

Jenny: Hannah and her mom helped us with gathering community members for a community walkability and bikeability audit, and we had – between community members and the school, we had over 300 walkability and bikeability audits completed.

We did different things while we were waiting for it to open, and a few years – I guess it was probably about a year before that, I had already worked with the school to try to come up with a Safe Route to School route. So, we worked to create that path, and in one of our meetings pretty early on, we had talked about incorporating the Safe Routes to School into the walking path piece of it because it connected at a single point by the gym.

Jane: In the beginning, you know, like I said, you know, I was concentrating on Lions Park for the youth, but when we got to doing all this, there is no age limit. We're calling it, like, 8 to 80, because you can walk it, you can run it, you can jog it, you can bike it – all these things.

Jenny: Part of this path comes around the senior housing.

Jane: It also goes by our library. I mean, it incorporates quite a bit here in just a small area of Newkirk.

Cate: So how much was the TAP grant for?

Jane: It was \$720,000, and the city's share of that is \$147,000.

Jenny: One of the, and correct me if I'm wrong, but it's one of the largest grants that Newkirk has received that's going towards the infrastructure specifically for pedestrian and bicycle safety.

Jane: It *is* the biggest.

Jenny: So it's going to be something that's really huge that is – it's connecting the community, it's going to allow for more people to get out to walk, and overall, it's going to improve quality of life.

Cate: To what extent was TSET involved in this and what other benefits has TSET had on the community?

Jenny: The Healthy Living Program, we've – and I say we – it's been from the beginning and the get-go.

Jane: Mm-hmm. Both of us. And some of the things – you know, we had become smoke-free, vapor free in our parks, all of our city properties. And then we had to have a wellness committee –

Jenny: Mm-hmm.

Jane: – and they meet quarterly to – what we can do to be healthier for ourselves and employees. It seemed like a whole lot, but – in the beginning, you know?

Jenny: [laughs]

Jane: But once we got going, it wasn't that hard, really, for us. And we encourage community gardens – the city'll support that. Just different things like that that I think makes us more aware of what we need to do to stay healthy.

Cate: Ladies, thank you so much for your time today. It's been really great to get to know you, and I'm really excited to follow up on all the changes that you're implementing here. So, thank you very much.

Jenny and Jane: Thank you.

[22:42]

Cate: So one thing that they were really proud of with getting this TAP grant was the ability to connect the entire city in a really safe and physically active way through these walking paths. So it's still in development; they haven't put it all into place yet, but they've already seen some amount of community excitement about it, seeing people walking around the city plaza. People are really going to start seeing the benefits of this for generations to come because it's going to create a town – a city of healthier and more active people.

James: Well, it's really nice to see and hear how the TSET HLP helped a small community get such a large Department of Transportation grant that will make such a long lasting impact, so thanks for bringing that to us.

Cate: And back in Norman in Cleveland County, James, you spoke with the Healthy Living Program coordinator Aley Cristelli about how support and guidance from the TSET-funded program helped to increase healthy food access in not just Norman, but also in smaller surrounding towns, right?

James: That's true.

Cate: That's great. Let's hear what she has to say.

[23:52]

James: Hello, Aley. It is so good to see you, and thank you for taking the time to spend a few minutes with us on the podcast.

Aley Cristelli: Yeah, thanks for having me.

James: Absolutely. Well, first thing I wanted to say and ask is Cleveland is one of the healthiest counties in the state, so, you know, why is it important for the TSET Healthy Living Program to be in the Moore and Norman area?

Aley: Yeah. You know, we're actually really proud of how healthy Cleveland County ranks in the state, and I think that we can take some of that credit. We've been here in Cleveland County with Norman Regional – we've had a grant for a really long time. So we had the opportunity to improve health here for many years. That partnership between Norman Regional and the TSET Healthy Living Program has the ability to have a really big impact because we can focus on the hospital taking care of clinical health care while we can focus on the community health, and it makes it easy to really maintain that health in the long run. And we have really great partners here, so we've been able to do a lot of really great things because we have the best partners on our side.

And we're still here because we're embarking on this new five-year grant because our work isn't done. We do rank highly in health outcomes, but we really have a large population here, so any work that we can do to improve health outcomes affects a lot of people. And while a lot of our work does happen in Moore and Norman, we do work in smaller communities, too, like Lexington and Noble where we've had a lot of success, and these communities do have poorer health outcomes and can benefit from that work just as much as the bigger communities like Norman and Moore.

James: Alright. That's great to hear. Well, the TSET Healthy Living Program in this county has done a lot to increase sustainable wellness, as you alluded to earlier, in businesses and schools, cities and towns, but one particular area of success, at least that I know about, has been in increasing access to healthy foods. Can you talk a little more about what's been happening in Norman and also in smaller towns that make it easier for people to get healthy foods?

Aley: Yeah. So, I talk a lot about access to healthy foods. It's definitely one of my favorite topics and passions. But over the previous Healthy Living grant, we were able to pass a healthy retail resolution in Norman, Noble and Lexington. All of those resolutions really set up a task force to address food access in each community, but the work really looks different in each area because we have different concerns and different community members at the table. So, in Norman, we had a lot of great discussion, and we ended up creating a food access map. We actually went out to all of the retailers that had food permits and we looked at what they were selling, how walkable they were, and we created a map that showed how easy it was to get to these areas, and then if they had healthy options at those stores. And that was housed on the city's web page so people could find it easily.

In Lexington – that's kind of a fun story – we started with a demonstration instead of just, you know, policy, and we did that because there wasn't a lot of discussion yet on food access. So, we started with pop-up farmers market and a play street. So basically, we closed the street and brought in vendors that would sell produce; we put toys out and chalk and paint for the kids to play with; we had music. It really just got people excited about having something in Lexington and what could happen. So that demonstration actually brought out and showed the need for a farmers market in Lexington and showed that it could work, and so we partnered with the health department, and during that day, we had people coming up constantly going, “Hey, how do we do this again next month?” So by the end of the day, we had two people who live in Lexington who were willing to keep the market going. They're actually in their second farmers market season this year. And we have helped them a little bit along the way with marketing and ideas, but really, it's community-led, and they're doing what works for their community. They're working to accept SNAP and senior benefits. And it's really cool to think back: we started that demonstration with five vendors and, you know, some chalk –

James: Yeah.

Aley: – and now they have 20 vendors, and it's happening every month, and it's completely community-led. So, that's a really exciting, fun thing that, you know – it just started with an idea and basically getting the city on board.

So, we did that in Lexington, and in Moore, we were able to help them get senior farmers market benefits and SNAP benefits at their farmers market. And, you know, it really helps the farmers, too. So, in Moore, now that money is going – instead of going to big box stores, it's actually going into farmers' pockets. So it really impacts the entire food system.

But moving forward, I'm really excited to, you know, continue the momentum of this food access discussion and really helping in Norman. We can put together a food policy council, so we can keep that going. But also, you know, as the world's shifted, and we are going to adopt a new normal, I'm hoping that we kind of use this lens that the pandemic has created and really highlighted some issues, and food access is one of those, and I'm really hoping that we can bring the good and address some of the things like food insecurity and food access that's really impacting people, and especially in these communities. So, hopefully there is some good that comes from this.

James: That's fantastic. A lot of things happening throughout the county, and not just Norman. And what I really enjoyed about what you said about Lexington, which is true with so many other projects and outcomes, is that you kind of were there to help get things started, but then the community took over, which is really a lot what the HLP does. It's about kind of really kick-starting the community for sustainable health. So, that's fantastic.

Aley: Yeah, I think you're so right. We can go in and tell people what to do, but nobody wants to be told what to do, and I think it works so much better when we go in and we show a

community what could be, and then they grab a hold of it and make it their own and make it sustainable like you said.

James: How long have you been with the HLP?

Aley: It's been a little while. So, December will be five years.

James: Wow. That's a very good run. You know, in those years of collaborating with community partners on a variety of projects and policies, what is it that motivates you to do this work?

Aley: Yeah. So, you know, I mentioned food access is something that is just really important to me and it always has been, but I've really been able to grow in that work and work on, not only food access, but a lot of health issues within the HLP program. But I'm really motivated in this work because you get to see the big picture. I worked in clinical nutrition prior to this and, you know, you get to see patients for a couple days, and you don't really know if, when they go home, you're making much of an impact. This work is slower, but it does have a larger impact. So that farmers market that we talked about – I had that idea for a long time and it took several years to get somebody to say yes, but now that market is going to impact the community, and it's impacting generations of people who are eating that healthy food every day, and there could be a child who never had fresh strawberries or never got to pick those or something, and they get to do that. And so the work is slow, but it really has a huge impact and a long-lasting impact on people's lives, and that's important to me.

James: Well, thank you for your time. I really appreciate it, and continued success to you and the others in your office and to your community partners. Thank you very much.

Aley: Yeah, thanks for having us.

[31:01]

Cate: You know, nutrition is so important for our well-being, and – we're seeing that especially right now – and those are some really awesome developments in Cleveland County, and it's yet another representative of the good work that the TSET Healthy Living Program does throughout Oklahoma.

James: That is so true. But you know, there is another TSET community-based grant program that really helps people of all ages throughout our state besides the Healthy Living Program, and that is the TSET Incentive Grants program for schools and communities. Now, I got to visit Prague Elementary School in Lincoln County to learn about the creative ways that they are helping kids and students with their health. That's just one example. But before we do, let's learn more about this program in general from Connie Befort and Sharon Howard. They are the program managers for the Healthy Incentive Grant programs, so let's listen in.

[32:01]

James: We are here at TSET with Connie Befort and Sharon Howard. They are program managers of the Healthy Incentive Grant program, and they will shine a little light in terms of what the program is all about. So, thank you for being here.

I'll ask this of you, Sharon: what exactly is the Healthy Incentive Grants program, and how does it work?

Sharon Howard: Basically our incentive grant programs are kind of an offshoot of TSET. We're out there working with community organizations as far as, like, with the cities, and I work with schools and school districts, and our program is really designed to help those cities and schools adopt and implement the best and promising practices, especially in the areas of tobacco-free environments, access to healthy and nutritious foods, access to additional physical activities, for playgrounds or for walking tracks, those kind of things, in an effort to improve health and reduce those risk factors that we know are preventable, so things like heart disease, stroke, cancer. And, along with TSET's mission, our goal is to improve the quality of life for all of our Oklahomans, and we do that by working in those community sectors.

James: This is some very important work here, in terms of lowering risk for very serious illnesses, but it sounds like the grants can be pretty fun, too, in terms of the outcome.

Sharon: Oh, absolutely. We do allow the communities and schools to be able to choose what their project is that they're going to work on or how they spend the incentive grant funds, and, overwhelmingly, the schools tend to spend their funds on either PE equipment or playground equipment. But they also do things like walking tracks or walking trails, action-based learning equipment – so that's equipment that allows the kids to be active and move while they're sitting in the class learning. So it makes learning fun; it helps those kids who have the wiggles be able to sit and actually learn much better.

James: All right. Connie, you manage the program that deals with healthy communities, but let me just ask you just a general question: how and when do schools and cities apply for healthy incentive grants?

Connie Befort: Our grant year coincides with the fiscal year, so we are into our FY 21 program. We will be announcing the criteria and the guidelines in September. Our application periods for FY 21 will be September 15 through October 15, and then again, January 4 through February 5.

James: Okay. And where do they find this information, for those who want to apply?

Connie: All of that information will be on our TSET website under funding opportunities.

James: Now, both of you have traveled quite a bit throughout the state to meet with people to tell them about the programs, and you met a lot of people along the way. Now, what sort of things do you see or hear or experience when you meet the people from these communities and schools that you come in contact with?

Sharon: For the schools, it's really exciting. They're usually always very happy to show off their project, and one of the things that I'm always really pleased to see is not only did they improve in the one area that their project was, but it makes a big difference for the culture of the school. Because of all the policies that they have to pass, it really changes their view of what health in schools really means. Some of our policy elements have to do with kids having more access to water during the school day; many of the schools use the funds to purchase what we call hydration stations – those are the water bottle filling stations that are very popular – and I get reports all the time of how much more water the kids are drinking, and not only the kids, but the faculty and staff also. In our rural schools especially, the school is the hub of the community, and it helps bring all of those factors together to help make a better, safer place for our kids to learn, and we know that healthy kids learn better.

James: So true, so true. And speaking of communities, when you go out to communities, what do you see and experience, Connie?

Connie: Well, it's been very interesting to see how these very small rural communities are getting together with partners – with their hospital, with their county health department, with their banks, with their chamber of commerce – and they do these actions and put together these policies to make their community better, and they work as a group. It's very interesting to see. We've had an instance where both the school and the community in south Oklahoma combined their money and built a toddler enclosed playground, not only for the school, but for the entire community.

James: Thank you for shedding some light on that. We appreciate it.

[37:19]

Cate: We're excited now to listen more about what's been going on at Prague schools, because the administrators there with, obviously, the help from the TSET HLP applied for and received one of these Healthy Schools Incentive grants that played a huge part in transforming the campus by adding playground equipment and opportunities for more nutritional snacks.

James: That is correct. So I paid this visit to Prague Elementary School where Principal Chad Smith and TSET Healthy Living Program Coordinator David Smith discuss the impact that the incentive grant has had on the kids and on the community.

[37:59]

James: Alright, we are here at Prague Elementary School, and we're talking with Principal Chad Smith – hello – and we're also here with David Smith, who is with the TSET Healthy Living Program. But first things first, Chad, wanted to talk with you about the Healthy Schools Incentive Program. You guys were able to earn grants with it, and wanted to know what the funds helped to pay for here.

Chad Smith: Well, first, thank you for coming today. We enjoy talking about our programs and things that we're able to do here at Prague Elementary. We did receive two grants separately and we were able to do a lot of different things with them in each building. One of the major things we've done that helps our kids is we were able to add water bottle filling stations all throughout our campuses. I see kids are actually drinking water instead of drinking pop and drinking Kool-Aid and all those kind of things. The kids drink water with a water bottle every day. We've had to change the filters I don't know how many times already because they're using it so much.

Over at the middle school, I know they bought basketballs, and they bought tether ball equipment. They bought volleyballs over there to get the kids playing at recess and keep them from just sitting down there and talking on their phones, and so they've got them up moving around.

The fridge – they bought a fridge at the high school. The healthy snack options in the vending machines aren't well received by students: whole wheat Pop-Tarts and low-fat Doritos – you know, those aren't the good things to eat. So they started doing parfaits and yogurt and granola and fresh fruit and grapes and stuff like that and store it the refrigerator, and our secretary of the high school was selling those on our nutrition break time in between second and third hour. They sold out just about every day. So they were able to get kids actually buying and eating fruit as opposed to a prepackaged thing out of the vending machines there.

We've done some stuff for our playground. We bought paint for our playground, which kind of seems like an odd buy, but out in the playground, our art club volunteered to come over through the high school and draw different games on the playground with them. There are little dinosaurs; they've got little games the kids can play; there's a race that they have to do a hop, a skip a turn, a run; walk the balance beam, those things outside, and they use it every single day. It's peeling up paint now because we're going to have to repaint them.

And then, we bought some equipment at the elementary, at the Early Childhood Center, for our ABC classroom, which is called our action-based classroom. We bought a rowing machine to add to our action-based classroom. And so, the action-based classroom is really important to those young kids, or those young teachers for sure, that use it all the time. If you want a chance to see an ABC classroom, we'd love to have you.

James: Can you tell us real quickly what an ABC classroom is? Action-based – what's that all about?

Chad: So our action -based classroom – there is a series of centers, basically, that have different actions associated with them. So what they're trying to do is they're trying to pair a physical activity with a mental activity. So, we have the QWERTY keyboard on the wall, and the kids will spell their spelling words throwing the ball against the wall and catching it off the board, so they're having to think about different obstacles other than just their reading. They have a treadmill over there that the kids run on and read off of. They have a high-knees jogger machine over there that the kids will say their vocabulary words, or what they've really used in these little grades is for sight words. And then they

have a figure 8 where they'll walk the figure 8 and the teacher will read to them, and it's amazing with retention what those kids learn, just something about that figure 8 and walking around. They have a balance beam section. There's about eight or ten different devices over there, or sections over there, where they're doing a mental exercise and an educational exercise at the same time to kind of cross those brain waves over. So, our ECC teachers, especially our kindergarten and first grade and Pre-K teachers really like it.

James: Very nice. So, it's a way of helping them learn more by using physical activity, so that's pretty cool.

Are there any other ways that perhaps the Healthy Living Program here has helped you and the school in addition to helping with the Healthy Incentive grants?

Chad: Yeah, they've really just got us thinking outside the box – Sheri and David have been instrumental in helping us with that – just trying to think of different ways to achieve objectives that work for our district, and every district's going to be a little different. We were trying to find a way to get kids on the playground more and to have kids still do their homework, and so we were able to add extra recess in the morning. So, from 7:45 in the morning to 8:15 in the morning, our kids now go to the playground and play, whether it be an organized game set up by the people on duty or just free play some days. Those kids come into the classroom, they got the wiggles out, they've got the shakes out, they're a little tired, and they come in and they sit down and they get right back to work, and our teachers have really enjoyed the fact that those kids are ready to learn. Our discipline in the mornings has gone down. And so now, they have a morning recess, then they have PE in the morning, and they have lunch recess. We've really added ton of physical activity to our day, and it's made a difference for the kids.

They've also really helped us just be able to apply for grants other than the ones that are offered through TSET on top of these, but they've helped us with outside grants, being able to find ways to adjust things to help our school. We have a school health team now that they were helping us and have helped us establish that they're part of. On that health team, we have a nurse. That nurse has been amazing for a small district. I mean, I look back now, I'm like, "How did we get by without a nurse?"

Our summer reading fitness program is something that we take a lot of pride in. It's a program that we've started several years ago. We started out with 30-something kids and it blooms now to over a hundred kids. And so, adding fitness and health with our reading program for 8 days in the summer. Our kids have access to a nutritionist, they have access to a health trainer, and they're also getting reading education over the summer as well.

And those things have been amazing for our district, and they help us every day.

James: Wow, that is fantastic.

I want to ask you, David: there are a number of communities, a number of schools here in Lincoln County, community governments and things like that – how is that you form partnerships with folks like Chad and others?

David Smith: Well, we're real fortunate. Both Sheri and I were in education for over 35 years, so we've got contacts that we've made throughout that time. I've taught – all my 35 years have been in Lincoln County except for three where I started out at Luther, so we had those contacts.

We've got nine school districts in Lincoln County, and one of those school districts is really well off so they don't need a lot of the incentive money and stuff like that, but they've worked with us helping us to rewrite their tobacco policies and health and nutrition. But every other school in Lincoln County has received an incentive grant through the Healthy Living Program that we've been working with. They've been really, really good to work with us. They've had questions. We'd rewrite their policies and help them get that done, and they'd call up with suggestions, "Can we do this? Can we do that?" Lincoln County has really accepted it, and it's really been a big benefit to Lincoln County. It's really helped all of those eight, all – really, all nine schools in Lincoln County, so it's helped all of them.

James: Final question for you, Chad. You mentioned some wonderful programs that have taken place here with these grants and funding. What has been the biggest surprise for you through any reactions to the programs, in terms of outcomes, what has surprised you most?

Chad: I think the biggest thing is how accepting our kids are – little kids – have been of it, the young kids. They have just taken off with the summer program stuff, but they've also taken off with the healthy eating stuff. We see a lot of kids now bring more fruit and vegetables to school in lunches than they ever did before. It's amazing when the kids in the summer program eat and they see the food, that it tastes good, and they're like, "Oh that's a peach! That's a real peach!" you know, as opposed to open-a-can-of-syrup peaches, you know. And so seeing those kids like fresh fruit and vegetables as opposed to there's a Snickers or there's a candy bar of some kind or something like that, that's been monumental. And I think just changing the culture of kids is a big deal at school. Prague's always prided itself on being a strong community, and seeing those young kids step up and go, you know, "We can change our future for the better," and so having access to those equipment, those fresh fruits and vegetables, seeing kids be active, you know, it's wonderful – just my own kids, seeing them want to be more active than they were before. TSET's started walking programs, or they've started little – back in the day, they had little contests back and forth just to get people up and moving, has been the big thing – how well accepted it was to the changes with the tobacco policies, with the Healthy Living policies, and the healthy parties and having healthy snacks at parties. So the kids have accepted it, they like it, and it's been beneficial for our community, too.

James: Thank you so much for your time. Really appreciate it, and congratulations for all the success here that you've had in Prague. And thank you David, you and Sheri. We appreciate your work here as well.

[46:46]

James: I tell ya, Cate, that was a fun visit.

Cate: I bet! It sounds like Prague has done a really great job of reimagining what a classroom can be, which is something that we're all going to need to be looking more into as this next school year comes around. Learning through physical activity, having recess in the morning, mentally engaging playground equipment – and it seems like it's had a pretty demonstrable impact on these kids.

James: Absolutely. It really has.

Cate: You know, James, though the TSET Healthy Living Program and Healthy Incentive grants, TSET really plays a vital role for the health and wellness of many communities in so many different ways, and it was really eye-opening to just listen to just a few of those stories, but it's through these strategic improvements that TSET has and will continue to transform communities that lasts for generations.

James: Absolutely. You know, and through TSET grant programs for cancer research and statewide healthy systems – through these other grants, people throughout Oklahoma, they gain even more benefit such as what we heard and discussed last month about access to rural medicine. But we will talk more about these programs in the weeks and months to come. So for now, thank you so much for tuning in. We really appreciate it, and we hope that you got a lot out of this.

So until next time, this is James Tyree –

Cate: – and Cate Howell.

James: Wishing you peace –

Cate: – and Better Health.

[Theme music]

[48:30]