

TSET Better Health Podcast Transcript

Episode 7: Free Resources for Hunger and COVID-19

September 28, 2020

Summary: School is back in session, and times are tough for all of us. This episode of the TSET Better Health Podcast provides listeners with informative interviews and lists of resources for those affected by food insecurity and COVID-19. Representatives from the Regional Food Bank and Hunger Free Oklahoma share the wide array of resources available to struggling Oklahomans, including senior meal boxes, prescriptions, food pantries, and more. Carrie Slatton-Hodges of the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services details all the services the agency provides in the age of COVID-19. Additionally, TSET's own Health Communication Manager Kelli Brodersen shares exciting developments in TSET's new healthy youth and food access initiatives.

[Theme music]

[0:15]

James Tyree: Hello, and welcome to Episode 7 of the TSET Better Health Podcast. I am James Tyree, health communication consultant here at TSET.

Cate Howell: And I'm Cate Howell, TSET health communication intern. And today, we are so delighted—we have really been looking forward to bringing you this episode that will focus on free resources for the health and wellness of all Oklahomans. These resources and other are always around, always important, but it's especially important that we talk about them now as we all try to get through this pandemic.

James: It's hard to believe, Cate, that it's only been six months since COVID-19 started to so drastically affect our health and how we live.

Cate: I can't believe it's only been six months. It really honestly feels like a year. [laughs]

And we have all felt this pandemic's impact on public health, jobs, education—and all of these factors can really take a toll on our physical health and our mental health, which is why we decided that now was really the perfect time to produce this episode.

Specifically, you're going to hear about TSET programs that focus on the wellbeing of youth and other people in need, an array of free resources from the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services to help cope with stress, and two other organizations focusing entirely on hunger and food insecurity and providing millions of meals to Oklahomans.

James: Let's learn about one of those organizations now, the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma. I knew the food bank fed an awful lot of people in western and central Oklahoma, but I was amazed to learn exactly how many and how it's done. Let's listen.

[2:09]

James: Hello Cathy and welcome to the TSET Better Health Podcast. It's great to have you here.

Cathy Nestlen: Well, thanks for including me, inviting me.

James: Well, the first question I wanted to ask is this: the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma serves 53 counties in western and central Oklahoma, which is quite a large area. So I wanted to ask, about how much food do you actually distribute, and to about how people in a given year, for instance, and how is this done?

Cathy: [laughs] We do service a pretty big service area. It encompasses about 48,000 square miles, so we have a fleet of 12 semi trucks—those are those 53-foot semis that you may see on the highways. Actually, this past fiscal year that just ended June 30 was a big year for us, in part due to our response to COVID-19 pandemic, but we pushed out just over 56 million pounds of food in a 12-month period.

James: That's amazing. 56 million pounds?

Cathy: 56 million pounds, and that equates to just over 46 million meals.

James: Wow, that's fantastic. So how does the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma get all of that food that is so greatly needed?

Cathy: Well, just like every other food bank across the country, we're part of the Feeding America network, which is 200 food banks across the U.S., and we rely about 90% of our food inventory being donated, so from manufacturers, and we have retail recovery program, and so we only typically have to purchase about 10% of our food that we distribute. But that changed this year when the pandemic occurred and there was a disruption, I should say, in the food supply chain, which I think we all experienced as we went to do our own grocery shopping during April and May, and even still—

James: Absolutely. [laughs]

Cathy: Yes. [laughs] Those empty shelves—it was kind of a shock. I don't know about you, but, you know, to try to go shop for something that you're used to being able to easily pick up at the grocery store and then to not have it be available was kind of an awakening, I guess, to say.

James: Big time.

Cathy: So we had to— actually, during the food supply—when the big disruption was happening during April and May, we had to start purchasing more food than we typically do, and so we were kind of competing with the retailers. We were spending quite a bit more money on purchasing food and still have to do a little bit now because the food supply chain still has not recovered completely.

James: I see. Well, that actually leads right into the next question I wanted to ask, and that is how has the pandemic affected your supply and demand?

Cathy: It has. We certainly have seen an increase in need for food assistance since the end of March. In fact, we—probably right around 30% increase, and it's remained steady since the end of March, and we're actually starting to see some upticks in the need for food assistance, and that's partly due to the additional unemployment benefits ending at the end of July.

Some people still have not recovered fully as far as employment goes. The economy may be reopening, but not every job that was there before the pandemic exists still, and if they are going back to work and it's an hourly job, there's a very good chance that their hours have been reduced because stores are not staying open as long as they had been for safety precautions, or they're limited on how many people they can serve, so they don't need as many employees in place, so there's already—I mean, Oklahoma, we're already a hungry state prior to the pandemic. You know, we currently are the fifth hungriest state in the nation. And so, you add the pandemic on top of that, and then also we're having a sluggish oil and gas industry situation going on, so it's been a real one-two punch for people who are on that border and live paycheck to paycheck in Oklahoma. To have this hit them on top of everything else, it's just been a real struggle.

James: Yeah. Absolutely.

Cathy: But, you know, we are really fortunate because we partner with about 320 what we call community-based partner agencies, and those are nonprofits and organizations located across the 53 counties that we serve in central and western Oklahoma, and of the 320, 300 have remained open and continuing to provide food assistance. And, like we've had to do, these partners have had to be innovative in how they provide that food assistance. And so, we're seeing a lot of drive-thru distributions occurring versus having people come in—that's a way to keep both the people we're serving safe as well as our staff and any additional help that we may be having.

We've had to lean in to our innovation and learn how we can do it and continue to get the food out there, and I'm proud to say that those 300 partner agencies are just out there on the front lines and finding unique ways and collaborations. You know, I've heard stories where they've used the police department to help deliver food to homebound families who didn't have transportation to even get to the drive-thru distribution. Another story at another nonprofit: the volunteer fire department came in to help unload the deliveries that we had sent to this agency because the volunteers that they had had were all in the high-risk and weren't able to be at the agency, so the lone person there could not by themselves help unload the delivery, so the volunteer fire department stepped in and came over and helped. So, you know, it's Oklahomans helping one another as they always do during times of crisis and need.

James: That's fantastic. You know, one area where need is always prevalent is with schools. And the school year is just beginning, but of course how and where kids go to school can shift because of the pandemic, whether they're learning from home or on campus or a

hybrid. So, wanted to ask how the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma is able to address those needs with so many things kind of in flux.

Cathy: Well, I just kind of have to brag on our Food For Kids program staff because they are pivoting and working hard with each and every district to adjust to whatever that district is doing, whether the district has gone virtual or part virtual/part in-person or all in-person, to ensure that we're still getting the backpack food out to the elementary school children, to make sure that we're still getting the pantry food out to middle and high school students. And they're doing a fabulous job of doing that, our staff is, and working, like I said, individually district to district.

We're also fortunate that the USDA has issued a number of waivers that have allowed providing meals to children up to 18 years of age much easier than in the normal times, and they've extended those waivers through the end of the year, and it's our hope that they will then again extend those through the end of May into 2021.

James: Good.

Cathy: So we're very pleased that the USDA has realized the challenges that their normal standards presented to providing meals to children in a safe fashion.

James: That is so good to hear, Cathy.

Cathy: Yeah, we were so thankful, and thanks to our congressional delegation for supporting that and helping to encourage those waivers.

James: Good. Well, finally, I wanted to ask how can people—how can people who are listening here and others donate their time and money to the food bank, and conversely, how can families and individuals who are in need of nutritious food access this valuable free resource?

Cathy: You bet. I wanted to assure anyone who's listening that if you're in need of food assistance or you know someone who's struggling, finding themselves for the first time not having that normal paycheck—and, you know, James, too often food falls so easily to the bottom of the list because people need to keep their roofs over the heads, so they have to pay rent and mortgage, they have to keep the lights and the air going, so they have to pay utilities, and prescriptions are a priority, and so food continually falls down that list of priorities.

And so, food assistance is available. It's available widespread throughout our 53 counties. I would encourage anyone who is in need or knows someone who's in need to call us, **405-972-1111**, and we can help find a food pantry nearby, or you can go to our website. You can just go to rfbo.org/gethelp and up pops a map, and you can plug in your five-digit zip code and it populates the food pantries nearby. So there's two very easy ways to help find food assistance.

Regarding volunteering, we're still not opening up our volunteer center to the public quite yet. We just feel like we can't accommodate the public at this time and feel great about maintaining social distancing and having masks and all that. So, unfortunately, we're unable to welcome volunteers, and trust me, we miss our volunteers greatly. We had, last year, nearly 42,000 or so individuals who came to volunteer, so—

James: Really?

Cathy: Yes. [laughs] So, we are—

James: Wow, that's great.

Cathy: It is. We love our volunteers and we have people inquire daily about when they can come back to volunteer. So, right now, the only way that you can help us is if you're able to make a financial donation. For every one dollar donated, we're able to provide four meals, so we're very efficient, very low overhead, so that 90 cents of every dollar donated goes to provide food assistance.

If you're able to make a donation, that's wonderful. If you're unable to make a donation, September is Hunger Action Month, and we're posting a lot of information on our social media channels. Very active on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) and [LinkedIn](#). We would encourage you to share that information that we're pushing out on our social about how you can help fight hunger in Oklahoma.

James: Good. Good, good, good. Well, thank you for that information, and thank you for your time, Cathy. We very much appreciate it and all the great work that your organization is doing.

Cathy: Well, thank you, and thank you to TSET.

[12:39]

James: 46 million meals in one year. Wow! And that is quite a system made possible by hundreds of companies and thousands of volunteers helping the Regional Food Bank. Be sure to check out their website at regionalfoodbank.org to learn more.

Now, what can you say about Hunger Free Oklahoma?

Cate: Yeah, Hunger Free Oklahoma is a really incredible organization. Their job is to fill in the gaps where places like Regional Food Bank might have a hard time reaching since they're "in the trenches" as our next guests say. They serve as connectors for all of these agencies across Oklahoma to set up a network of food banks, food pantries and other assisting organizations to all help one another. They look at food insecurity from a bird's-eye view and find the areas that need extra help. Our next guests, Katie Maxey and Katie Maschino, do a really great job of explaining what they do.

[13:45]

Cate: Hello listeners. We are here today with Katie Maxey and Katie Maschino of Hunger Free Oklahoma. Good morning.

Katie Maschino: Good morning!

Katie Maxey: Good morning!

Cate: So, firstly, we have Katie, Katie and Cate happening right now.

[All laugh]

I just want to throw that out there. That's really exciting to me.

So, can you tell me a little bit about both yourselves as individuals and also about Hunger Free Oklahoma? How did it get started? What's the program?

K. Maxey: Absolutely. Yeah, so, Katie, do you want me to go first?

K. Maschino: Yep, go for it.

K. Maxey: Just jump right in? Okay. So, my name is Katie Maxey. I've been with Hunger Free Oklahoma for total of coming up on three years, but for two years of that, I've served as the communications and administrative coordinator. We're a particularly young organization, under about three four years old, and we began because Oklahoma, partnering with Texas Hunger Initiative, they did an assessment on Oklahoma and food insecurity, and we found that we really needed a collaborative, convening agency for food insecurity issues, and so that's where Hunger Free Oklahoma was born.

We are the master connectors. We help bridge the gap between organizations and state agencies to try to get the word out about federal nutrition programs and strengthening and expanding those federal nutrition programs.

So that's kind of what we do, and that's a little brief description about me.

K. Maschino: So, my name is Katie Maschino. I am a hunger outreach specialist in the Oklahoma City office. My background is in nutrition and dietetics, and then I got my master's degree in community health promotion, so food insecurity has always been something that I have been very passionate about and interested in. I've always kind of asked the question of, you know, it's not just enough to feed people and get people the calories that they need, but also find them nourishing, wholesome foods so that they can get the nutrients that they need to really engage and live active, healthy, engaging lives rather than just kind of getting by.

So I tend to take a little bit more of the public health and nutrition view and lens on the staff, but we all come from really diverse backgrounds, which is one of the things that I love most about organization. A couple of us have public health backgrounds, a couple of us have nonprofit, some of us have some state agency work. So I really love our team

and I think that we collaborate really well within our organization and can kind of take those different approaches to try to have a more comprehensive view of the issue from organization to organization or community to community.

And I've been with Hunger Free for about a year and a half now.

Cate: So, we met originally during the recording of episode 4 at the Scissortail Farmers Market.

K. Maxey: Yeah.

K. Maschino: Yeah, we were at the farmers market at Scissortail Park basically just doing a lot of outreach. We are still a very young organization, so a lot of the work that we do right now is just letting people know that we're here, and we are a resource to kind of help them improve food security in their communities.

Cate: Cool. So, what is the situation with food insecurity in Oklahoma right now?

K. Maschino: A lot of the stats that we have are still pre-COVID. We're not really sure what that full impact is yet, but unfortunately, Oklahoma does struggle with food insecurity at higher rates than the national level. We are consistently in the top 10 of states across the nation that struggle with this issue. So, you know, this was an issue before COVID, and with COVID closures and things like that, it's only enhanced this problem. So, we're definitely seeing a lot more need, getting a lot more questions about how organizations can help their communities, and, yeah, so there's definitely higher need that we can see.

K. Maxey: Katie, I'm going to chime in: there's an organization called Feeding America—it's a nationwide hunger relief organization, so people are very familiar with them—but they have projected Oklahoma's food insecurity rate to increase to 20%. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, we were sitting at about 15% food insecurity, so that's a whole 5% increase. So we are looking at people that are—maybe this is the first time in their lives they've been food insecure, really don't know how they're going to pay the rent. This is a unique period because there's a lot of firsts for a lot of Oklahomans. So it's really important now than ever to ensure that they get the access to the food resources that they need.

K. Maschino: A lot of people consider it as they have those physical symptoms of hunger, whether it's, you know, that stomach ache or maybe even headache or feeling tired or anything like that, but it's also important to realize that food insecurity factors in those mental and emotional effects of not knowing where your next meal is coming from. So, are you worried about it? Does it consume your thoughts? Is it making you anxious? So, even if people were a little more sure that they could at least eat every day, now that people are a little more worried, that's what kind of factors into driving up that rate of people who are food insecure, because there are different levels. It's kind of a spectrum. It's not just a binary: you are food insecure or you are food insecure.

Cate: That was going to be my next question: what does food insecurity mean, and then also what are the factors that contribute to food insecurity? How does someone become food insecure?

K. Maschino: The issue of food insecurity and hunger is a very complicated and complex web of potential factors. So, we see that poverty and food insecurity are very, very closely tied. Other things like housing insecurity, so not having a secure housing situation, that definitely plays into food insecurity. Not having a stable job can play into it. You know, it's really important to also realize that anyone can fall into economic hardship at any time, whether it's having a relative that's gotten sick and needs to move in with you, or having a child's friend from school who needs a place to stay coming to stay with you for a little bit, or maybe something happens with your car and having an unexpected car issue to take care of.

You know, we've seen in the past that the majority of people are not necessarily living paycheck to paycheck, but not really able to save up and have those emergency funds to get them through a month or two at a time. Previous examples would include like the government shut down that happened within the last couple years and, you know, just how much of a toll that took on such a large amount of the population. So this isn't unique to one specific population. It's not unique to one specific group of people.

It's important to realize, you know, anybody who's feeling that struggle right now is not alone. There are a lot of people in this boat, which is why we work to promote these federal nutrition programs, which are designed to help people that are exactly in the position they are in now, and increasing participation in those, which actually helps boost our local economy.

Cate: Great! So tell me about those programs.

K. Maschino: Yeah, so the federal nutrition programs, the main ones we work with right now are grocery assistance programs. So most people know the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP. That was formerly known as food stamps. There is also a special supplemental nutrition program for women, infants and children. That one is known as WIC. Oklahoma is unique in the fact that we have our statewide agency that has a WIC program, but then we also have tribal nations that have their own branch of WIC. Also, with the tribal nations and having that in mind, there is the food distribution program for Indian reservations. With SNAP in particular, we just brought on a new program called Double Up Oklahoma, which is a way that people who receive SNAP benefits can use their benefits at local farmers markets, and it's a way for them to make their benefits stretch further for fresh produce. That's an exciting program that we just brought on.

And then we also work with a lot of the child nutrition programs. So that's mostly with schools, but there are also ways in which local community organizations, faith-based organizations, community centers, YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, libraries, things like that can opt into them. Yeah, really just trying to figure out how to increase access to meals for kids is what we think about with those child nutrition programs.

K. Maxey: By not utilizing these federal nutrition programs, we leave a lot of money on the table, and this money is just sitting there, [laughs] and we can use it and bring it back to Oklahoma. Just a fun fact is that for every dollar in SNAP that is spent, \$1.70 is generated into the local economy.

Cate: Excellent. I was going to ask you, Katie Maxey, how is this organization unique? What makes it different from other agencies that address food insecurity?

K. Maxey: That is a wonderful question. So, we are not a food bank. We do not do emergency food assistance. The way that we fit into the food insecurity programs in Oklahoma, like I said in the beginning, we are the large, convening agency. Like the food banks, the food pantries—they are doing the frontline emergency food assistance. They are serving people that are like, “I need food today,” right? They don't have time to reach out and connect. They're serving that population right then and there, and so our job is to kind of come in—and we're more indirect. We don't directly serve individuals in Oklahoma, although that has kind of changed during COVID-19. We created a program called Tulsa Kitchens Unite out of Tulsa, Oklahoma, where we did a little bit of direct service.

But we connect people. If you have a local organization that says, “You know, our kids come in for this program and we've just been getting donated food to feed them a snack.” Well, did you know that you can also do something called after-school meal program? Or you could do summer meals during the summer and get reimbursed for those meals and also feed those kids? Well, that local organization's like, “But how do I do that?” Okay, cool, we'll connect you with a local food bank or we'll connect you with the YMCA who's serving as a summer meal sponsor and you could be their site. But that's kind of what our job is.

K. Maschino: Emergency food system and the food banks and food pantries and the soup kitchens—they are getting absolutely inundated with people in need right now, and so, if we can kind of pull some people out of that line because they are receiving these other benefits that they are eligible for, that frees up and kind of lessens the demand on those emergency food resources and kind of lets them stretch that a little bit further to the people who may not be eligible for the federal nutrition benefits. So it's important to see that they go hand-in-hand and they play off of each other very well, and that's the way they were designed. There's no one-size-fits-all model for how to best tackle food insecurity in a community.

And so, again, like Katie said, we are here to be that collaborator. We're here to bounce ideas off of. “Okay, let's try this. Maybe it didn't work. Let's try something else.” Bringing all of the people to the table at once. We're constantly asking who else needs to be a part of this conversation. We have the privilege and the opportunity to take a little bit more of a comprehensive look and be able to step back and kind of see how it's going to play out on a systems level, on a little bit longer term level so that we can help people who are so in the trenches feeding people every single day, kind of help them take a step back and look at how they can continue their work long-term and potentially even expand their offerings.

Cate: That's excellent. So, my final question: if somebody comes to you who is struggling, who needs help, where would you direct them? What services would you offer? Even if it's not specifically Hunger Free, what are some resources that you know of that you would send someone who needs help?

K. Maxey: Ooh, well, just thinking within our work, we created a webpage on our webpage, hungerfreeok.org, and it's our [COVID-19 resources](#) webpage, and there they can figure out how to—not figure out, but how to apply for grocery assistance. That would be my first thing. “Let's see if you qualify for SNAP benefits.” And we actually recently created a—we're calling it the [SNAP application hotline](#). If you call **1-877-760-0114**, we have trained SNAP specialists that are available to handle SNAP applications, and they fill it out for you online, so you don't even have to get on a computer. Let's say you don't have access to that. You can simply call this number and someone can help you apply for SNAP benefits on the phone.

And also, “Hey, do you need immediate food assistance?” I specifically manage our [Facebook](#) webpage, and we've had a lot of messages and comments about, “I didn't qualify for SNAP, but I don't know what to do.” “Okay, well, let me send you to your local food bank, your local food pantry.”

Call 2-1-1. I would definitely tell them to call 2-1-1. 2-1-1 can help them find their local food pantry, looking for emergency food assistance, that sort of stuff.

But that's kind of what I would do. What about you, Katie?

K. Maschino: No, that's good. I would say that the SNAP hotline, they can, like Katie said, help you walk through and submit that initial SNAP application, but while they have you on the phone, they can help you find local resources. They can do a quick Google search if you don't have access to a computer or you don't want to use data on your phone. Whatever situation you're in, if you just tell them where you're located, they can help you identify some local resources. I would encourage people to ask them questions.

Again, remember, there are a lot of people in this boat right now. So kind of ask around for local—churches often have some kind of food pantry or congregate meal. We find that city officials are very plugged into the resources that are available in their local communities, so maybe reaching out to local city officials. Schools are typically very plugged into local resources, so if you have a child in a public school, reaching out to them to see what resources they are aware of. Yeah, I think that's it.

K. Maxey: Well, and to continue—to continue on that, Katie, one thing I do want to be sure that we say on this podcast is that last Monday, August 31st, the USDA—it extended flexibilities through the summer meals program. So, you know, within school systems, you have to complete a free-and-reduced-price-meal application, right? But they won't have to do that now. Schools are able to serve free meals to all of their students. So really making sure that families know this, you know, to get your kid to school earlier so that they know that, “Okay, cool, they've got a free breakfast waiting for them. Okay, they've got lunch packed.” It's just one less thing that the family has to think about.

And also, on that same vein, this program called Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer. It's a mouthful, but it stands for P-EBT. This benefit will help families with children who have received free or reduced-price meals in schools. During March of this spring semester when schools closed down, those kids missed out on those free or reduced-price meals, so what USDA did is issued this benefit called P-EBT to those families that had a kid eating a free or reduced-price meal. This has been distributed already in Oklahoma, but a lot of families don't know what it is. It may be coming in the mail. So, we're actually urging families: if you're receiving these P-EBT benefits in your mail, or you're confused, or you just want some questions answered, you can visit our website at hungerfreeok.org/pebt, and we have an FAQ section that can help answer a lot of questions there for families. So I really wanted to make sure we get those two things out there.

We just want to also say thank you so much, Cate. We're really happy that you invited us on this podcast. It's really fun to partner with TSET. We're so excited.

Cate: Well, awesome, we're excited, too, and it was great running into you at the farmers market. Turned out to be really beneficial meet-up. And thank you both so much for everything you do and for coming onto our show. It's been really great to have you.

K. Maschino: Yeah, thank you.

K. Maxey: Thank you so much, Cate.

[30:28]

Cate: It was so fun hanging out with the Katies, and it was great to learn about Hunger Free Oklahoma. It is such a unique and forward-thinking agency, and it's really changing the conversation of food insecurity in Oklahoma, providing a really needed resource for anyone who's working to address food insecurity and food access. But, you know, with everything that's going on, we're seeing that addressing mental health needs is really just as important as tackling physical health and nutrition.

James: So true. While doing research for this episode, I was impressed by the number of free mental health resources that are available, so we hoped to have someone from the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services talk more about them with us. We were fortunate in that Interim Commissioner Carrie Slatton-Hodges agreed to talk with us. She was a deputy commissioner for 12 years before becoming interim commissioner, and she has nearly 30 years of experience as a licensed professional counselor. Let's hear what Commissioner Carrie Slatton-Hodges has to share with us.

[31:41]

James: Hello. Good afternoon, and thank you for joining us this afternoon. We very much appreciate you being here. In looking over the subject about free resources available for

Oklahomans, we know that mental health and maintaining wellness in that area is very, very important, and so thank you for your time.

Carrie Slatton-Hodges: Absolutely. Glad to be here.

James: You know, the past six months have been really different, kind of stressful for a number of families, and wanted to just ask you what types of resources are available through the agency that can help parents and caregivers of kids during this time.

Carrie: Well, you are right. This has been a particularly stressful time for many persons across Oklahoma. In particular, we experience stress when things happen that we feel like are beyond our control or whether or not we can handle those. So you have a lot of Oklahomans in terms of being fearful about their health, being fearful about their jobs, what the future is going to look like, when are things going to be normal so to speak, and all of that creates extra stress for us.

When we first started kind of down the line with this pandemic, we started looking for ways to help people not just who walk into our doors or who call our different facilities, but in a much broader perspective, so we developed on our website— there's kind of a button and a banner that you can click on it anytime on our [ODMHSAS website](#) that is [COVID resources](#).

One of the COVID resources on there that I think is particularly helpful is an [e-learning series on self-care](#). Because we started getting inundated with people not just necessarily who we think of that we would normally serve, but co-workers, friends, family who needed to get kind of back to basics and understand what self-care for your mental health is. So we have a video series, an e-learning series on that COVID resources page around self-care. It is a series of different videos that takes you through how to keep yourself healthy and well during times of stress or otherwise, and then it breaks those down even further to specifically teach you things that you can do to help your brain and your mind stay healthy and well during this particular time or in any stressful times. And it is excellent for teens, for families, for families to do together. It's done in a way that most anybody can learn from and enjoy working with that self-care video.

James: When someone goes to the website and checks out the videos, are they arranged in a way according to topic or to age or how is that set up?

Carrie: It is one series, and it starts off just kind of self-care 101, and then it kind of guides you if you want to learn more, then it goes into breaking down specific techniques for self-care. Really helpful resource.

James: Excellent. Are there other resources that teens and maybe their parents can tap into to help them during not only pandemic related stress, but also just the regular stressors of life?

Carrie: Yeah, so one of the first things that I would want to say is that when anyone is having a challenging time that there are a multitude of resources that are out there, and if you

can remember nothing else but to call 2-1-1, that is something in Oklahoma you can do. We make sure and partner with 2-1-1 so that resources and linkage to anything from where the closest agency that can provide mental health or addiction treatment is, they can easily transfer you to align where someone can talk to you if you're in serious distress at that point in time. So remembering 2-1-1 is a great resource that I would always encourage people to do. They'll transfer you to the suicide helpline if that's what is needed. They can also transfer you into the gamblers helpline, the veterans helpline— all of those resources can be reached by just calling 2-1-1, so first and foremost, I would want people to remember that. And in particular when you're talking about those various helplines, the suicide helpline is also broken down to where it has specific resources for teens as well as adults, so they will maneuver that for you behind the scenes if you just remember to call that 2-1-1.

But in addition, on our [website](#), there is a host of resources. We talked about the video. It also tells you to call 2-1-1 or the lifeline. It's listed on there. 2-1-1 will get you to the lifeline, though, so you really only have to remember one number. And then there's links to additional resources, and they're all broken down by categories. They're broken down by [parents and caregivers of children or teens](#), [childcare providers, schools or higher education](#), [teens and parents of teens](#), [adults](#), and [mental health providers, practitioners and community partners](#). So it's broken out so that you can go into what is most specific to what you're looking for or what you're needing, and then it will continue to provide you resources from there.

James: That sounds great. These resources, just hearing you speak about them, makes me think that there are resources available that people can check out online for help or even in person if need be. Is that right?

Carrie: Absolutely. We want to link you to provider agencies and treatment services if that is what you're needing or where you're at, but also ways that you can be supported and provided assistance while you're at home. So, for example, prior to this pandemic, you might support your recovery from addiction by going to AA meetings or NA meetings, 12-step meetings, that kind of help keep you on the right track, encourage you to be in the right frame of mind on a daily basis. Well, there are links on here for how you can go do that virtually where almost any day of the week there will be a virtual AA or NA meeting for you to participate in to help keep you in recovery, help prevent relapse during these particular stressful times, even when you may not be able to get out and congregate with the support system like you could in the past. And that's just an example of the types of resources on there.

But there are additional resources, again, for family members, for persons who have serious mental illness and addiction issues or just even if their teen is experiencing some challenge, or wondering about, "How do I best support my child during this time when maybe they're not around their friends as much?" et cetera. So really tailored to your needs.

But yeah, so there may be places you can go. There may be virtual places you can go. Some are e-learning series. And then some is just valuable information for you to be

able to read to help you know that you are doing the right things or asking the right questions or providing the best type of support.

James: Sounds like there's a pretty good range of resources from people almost for crisis situations all the way down to just regular mental wellness, well-being.

Carrie: It is the full range. You know, first and foremost, we want to make sure that people who are in crisis get what they need, but we want to help prevent somebody from ever getting to that point, and so there is the entire wealth of information.

There are some additional free training materials on our website and that we can promote for persons. We also do mental health first aid, teaching you how to identify when someone else is having difficulties with mental health, and the steps that you should follow to, in the best way possible, assess the situation and help link them for care. There is a series called [Kognito](#), which is a role-playing simulation that builds skills of parents to be responsive to their 2- to 5-year-olds.

James: Oh, nice.

Carrie: So it kind of teaches parents how to interact with their children in the best way, making sure that they're meeting their needs, that they're supporting their development. There is Resilience in Times of Uncertainty, and it teaches adults about resiliency factors and how they can identify those and how they can build on those. And then LivingWorks START is an online training, and it has an interactive simulation that teaches participants 13 and older to recognize when someone is thinking about suicide and what they can do to better assess and/or link and help that individual.

Those are examples of different types of things that can be very specific to the needs that someone is experiencing, and what I would say is they're also really great resources for even when you're not in a period of time where you're feeling like you may need some extra help or a friend may need some extra help. They're great to go in and view and learn about even from a preventative perspective, so that if you are ever in a situation where those types of skills or resources might become available, you're already well aware of what those are. You're also well aware of how you can help keep yourself healthy. You may not always be feeling so healthy, or to keep yourself feeling healthy in the future as stress increases or decreases over time.

James: That's really good to know. Preventative measures are so, so helpful. Wanted to ask you—this is my final question for you—you guys are here at the Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services. You have families. You have lives. How are you and your colleagues holding up during this tough time?

Carrie: You know, I think it ebbs and flows with everyone. We've gone through kind of the initial hyper-vigilant time of making sure that all of our facilities and resources could still be available while also keeping our staff safe, and that took a lot of energy and time and planning and training. And we got past that and started to have a sigh of relief, only realizing that everybody needed to keep their support up, needed to be tag-teaming

during this time to make sure that we're all at our best and doing our best. So it is challenging.

I would say from more of a personal perspective, the biggest challenge that I, myself, have is I have parents that are over 90. We are used to being a family that spends a lot of time together and is able to support each other in that way, and we've had to come up with ways to be supportive. In particular of my parents, that doesn't always include family gatherings or face-to-face, because what's most important is their health so that we can get to the other side of this when we can gather it together again. So that's probably been the most stressful thing for me during this.

James: That's something that a lot of people can relate to because they're in the same situation themselves.

Carrie: Yes, yes, and you want to make sure that your family feel supported and loved and has interaction, but you've just had to be really creative about what that looks like. We know that persons over a certain age are more vulnerable to poor outcomes from this virus, and we don't want to risk that in any way. So, as a family, we've just really had to be creative about how we continue to communicate and support each other.

James: Can you share at least, like, one creative way of keeping in contact?

Carrie: Well, I come from a family that prayer is a big part of our family gatherings, and being separated is somewhat challenging, so every night at eight o'clock, we all say the same prayer and then we all text on this group text our praying hands that show that we've all prayed together during that time. It's maybe not for everybody, but I do think it helps—that's *one* way that it helps our family all feel connected. You can see everybody light up, that we've all prayed together at eight o'clock every night.

James: That is wonderful. All of your insights have been wonderful, and we very much appreciate it. Thank you for your time.

Carrie: Absolutely. Thank you for visiting with us.

[43:53]

James: The state really does offer a wide array of mental wellness resources for Oklahomans, and as the commissioner said, dialing 2-1-1 is your entry to many of them.

Cate: On top of that, back to physical health and help with substance abuse, TSET funds a variety of free wellness programs, including two brand new exciting programs: first, our youth tobacco cessation initiative and a food access program to increase access to nutritional food across Oklahoma to anyone in need. Our friend and colleague, Kelli Brodersen, gives us the details.

[44:07]

Cate: Well, hello listeners, and joining us right now is Kelli Brodersen, our very own health communication manager for TSET.

Hello Kelli. Thanks for being here with us.

Kelli Brodersen: Hi, Cate. I'm glad to be here.

Cate: So how about—we would love to know a little bit more about you and your background in public health and how you became part of TSET.

Kelli: Okay. Well, I'm a native Oklahoman, and I grew up here in a family where both my mother and my grandmother worked in healthcare here in Oklahoma City, so I feel like public health is kind of in my blood. I'm also a proud alumna Northeast High School where I was enrolled in the bio med program there, so I was interested in pursuing a career that was related to health and medicine. But when I went to college, I actually studied art and communication, which actually led me to a career in broadcasting for a while, but I eventually found my way back to public health when I do joined the communications team at the Oklahoma Health Care Authority, and that's the agency that administers the state Center Care program, which is the Medicaid program. And I spent about six years there working in health communication and I really have a love for it. And so I just feel very fortunate to be doing what I love to further impact the health of Oklahomans through my work at TSET.

Cate: Well, we—TSET is really glad to have you. You've been an amazing asset for us, and thank you for all the things you do.

Kelli: Thank you. You're too kind. [both laugh]

Cate: Well, so, we're here to talk today about COVID-19, obviously shaking everything up. Lots of people struggling right now, maybe struggling with food insecurity, maybe struggling with substances, maybe job loss. We're all having a hard time right now, especially with school starting up. So, we wanted to just kind of talk about what is TSET is doing right now to reach out and help these people. What are some resources that TSET provides to help people?

Kelli: Well, TSET has a wealth of resources to help all Oklahomans feel and live better, not just during this pandemic, but all of the time. So we are just working overtime trying to put out things that we feel our friends and families and neighbors can utilize to navigate this crazy time that we're in. Shape Your Future has a lot of online tools and tips, such as meal plans, shopping lists, quick and healthy recipes. There are workout plans that you can do anywhere, and there's even a health quiz to help you determine where you are health-wise and gives you simple steps to take toward living a healthier lifestyle. And you can find all of that at our website at shapeyourfutureok.com.

And then for our civically minded folks, we've got information about tobacco control that's available at stopswithme.com. You can find the latest news on Big Tobacco and what we can do in Oklahoma to protect our kids and our public spaces from secondhand

smoke and other negative effects of tobacco products. Everyone can sign up for our monthly newsletters, which are free, they come through your email. And those are available from [Shape Your Future](#) and [Tobacco Stops With Me](#) by visiting the websites where you can also download and order free printed materials like healthy tip cards and anti-vaping handouts and posters.

Probably TSET's most well-known resource is also a service, and that's the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline that can be reached at **1-800-QUIT-NOW** or online at okhelpline.com. As you know, through TSET funding, the helpline provides free tobacco cessation services and even free patches, gum and lozenges for Oklahomans who are seeking to quit tobacco, and it's helped thousands of Oklahomans live tobacco-free, which is great, especially during this time of COVID where research is showing that smoking and tobacco use can increase a person's chance for negative outcomes with COVID-19.

And then we have our new My Life My Quit program, which actually is a tobacco cessation program designed specifically for teens to help them break free from tobacco and vape use and nicotine addiction. It's a really, really great program where kids can simply just text START MY QUIT to 855-891-9989 to enroll in the program, and it's free and it's confidential. They can also learn more about it at mylifemyquit.com.

There's so much that we're doing right now just to help people navigate these times and feel better and maintain their health. And we also have our Healthy Living Program coordinators who are working across the state in communities to make improvements there as well. So, I'd encourage anyone who wants to learn more about TSET to definitely explore all of the prevention and wellness resources that TSET has to offer.

Cate: Cool. Okay, so we cover a lot of ground as far as prevention goes—

Kelli: Yes.

Cate: —and we are—correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe we are the only state agency that actually has a really big emphasis on prevention.

Kelli: Yes, prevention is—that's our mission. We are tasked with fighting the two leading causes of death in our state, which are cancer and cardiovascular disease, so all of the programs that we have in place, including our health communication programs, are focused toward that end of helping people to, you know, give them the tools they can use to live better and get more exercise and be tobacco free. All of those behaviors can turn the tide on cancer and cardiovascular disease and just help us as a state move forward and move up those health rankings.

Cate: Save lives, for sure.

Kelli: Yes, absolutely.

Cate: But we also recently launched a couple of new big things, right? We have the Healthy Youth Initiative and we also have a food access program. Can you tell us a little bit about those?

Kelli: Yeah. The TSET Healthy Youth Initiative is actually a new program that was launched in August. It is a public education program targeted to teens 13 to 18 in our state to help fight the rising rates of tobacco and vaping use as well as the rising rates of obesity among Oklahoma youth. And so, we kicked off those prevention messages in August, and our nutrition campaign will be coming up at the beginning of 2021, and we're very excited about that. And the messaging can be checked out on our new website, which is TSEThealthyyouth.com, and I'm just really excited about their program because teens are kind of their own animal. They're not quite kids, they're not quite adults, and they just have their own language that they speak. So it's great that we're going to have some resources that are tailored to help them make better informed choices about the things that affect their health.

Also in August, the TSET board of directors allocated \$1 million to support projects that will help fight food insecurity and increase healthy food access in our state. These are going to be short-term grants that we funded for a year. But they awarded seven grants, and they went to organizations like Hunger Free Oklahoma, Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma, and even Gateway to Prevention and Recovery which is based in Shawnee.

So TSET just does a lot of work to increase positive health outcomes, especially since we're in the midst of a pandemic like we've been talking about. Helping Oklahomans with basic needs like healthy food for their families to maintain their well-being is absolutely in line with our mission.

Cate: Absolutely. Well, Kelli, thank you so much for taking some time out to let us know about these resources today. We really appreciate it.

Kelli: Absolutely. Thank you.

[52:57]

Cate: One of the incredible and unique things about TSET is that we see all of these different statewide needs regarding health, and we approach them and try to address them from so many different angles. Our mission, which is to help Oklahomans quit tobacco, eat healthy and exercise—all of these are critically important right now to surviving this pandemic. But we know that it can be really hard to find the time and resources to do all of these things, to make these nutritious meals, to find time in the day to exercise, but now you know what resources are available to help you out. We want to back you up.

James: This is an economically tough time for many of us, so it's good to know about these free resources, and the resources that TSET and the State Department of Mental Health offer really benefit anyone regardless of socioeconomics. So feel free to reach out to any of these organizations for assistance or to the hunger organizations if you want to help your fellow Oklahoma neighbors.

Cate: We are so privileged, grateful and honored to bring you this information, and we really hope you find it helpful. We love making these podcasts for you, and if you have any feedback for us, we would love to hear from you. Please reach out to us. You can find us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

And we invite you to listen to next month's podcast, and you can also check out any previous episodes on the TSET website at TSET.ok.gov/podcast or wherever you listen to podcasts. We are on [Spotify](#), [Apple Podcasts](#), [Google Podcasts](#), [Stitcher](#), and [TuneIn](#).

So thank you so much for listening, and until next time, this is Cate Howell –

James: – and James Tyree, wishing you peace –

Cate: – and Better Health.

[Theme music]

[55:18]