

TSET Better Health Podcast Transcript

Episode 9: Youth Vaping and the Great American Smokeout

November 19, 2020

Summary: In honor of the Great American Smokeout, a national holiday to encourage tobacco cessation for one day, James and Cate explore the current state of youth vaping with advocates and professionals alike. Hear conversations with Rescue founder Jeff Jordan and Tulsa Public Schools physical education coordinator Jen Sanders about the myths, facts, figures and advice for youth vaping. Paola Klein of the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline describes the tools and strategies that allows OTH to be so successful. Later, TSET Executive Director Julie Bisbee joins in to celebrate the 20th anniversary of TSET's creation and how youth vaping has made TSET's mission more important than ever.

[Theme music]

[0:15]

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

Cate Howell: And I am Cate Howell, co-host and producer of what is now our 9th episode of the podcast. It's hard to believe we're nine episodes in, but on the other hand, this podcast series is just getting started in sharing health-related stories and information with you, our listeners.

This episode comes to you on the Great American Smokeout, an annual national event that encourages people to quit cigarettes and other forms of tobacco use.

J. Tyree: That's right. The Great American Smokeout, or GASO, always takes place on the third Thursday of November. Now, that's easy for me to remember because it's exactly one week before Thanksgiving, and my first day with TSET happened to fall on GASO back in 2011. But to help us all remember the significance of the GASO – or quitting tobacco on any day – we will hear first from Paola Klein, the state coordinator of the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline.

C. Howell: Hey, and congratulations on your 9-year TSET anniversary, James. That's pretty exciting.

J. Tyree: Thank you!

C. Howell: [laughs] We at TSET are also thrilled about our new tobacco education and quit services designed specifically for teenagers through TSET's new Healthy Youth Initiative. We are partnering with the Rescue Agency, an organization that specializes in positive behavior change for youth and young adults, and I had the chance to have a conversation with Jeff Jordan, Rescue's innovative president, founder and executive creative director.

J. Tyree: Hearing that will be a treat, Cate, because Jeff really is a brilliant guy who knows his stuff about teens, vaping and behavior change. Along those same lines, I recently had a chat with Jen Sanders, physical education coordinator of Tulsa Public Schools and a wellness champion for students in who, with others including the TSET Healthy Living Program, has taken steps to lower vaping and tobacco use among students in her school district.

C. Howell: And finally, with TSET's 20th anniversary fast approaching, I had a chance to ask TSET Executive Director Julie Bisbee about the agency's history and accomplishments in lowering tobacco use rates, which has saved thousands of lives and millions of dollars.

J. Tyree: Indeed. Since this is the Great American Smokeout, let's hear first from Paola Klein, who does a great job of coordinating the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline from the OU Health Sciences Center campus.

[3:00]

J. Tyree: Hello, and it's so nice to have you here, Po. Thank you for joining us. We really appreciate it.

Paola Klein: Yeah, thanks for having me.

J. Tyree: Absolutely, and also, oh by the way, happy Great American Smokeout day!

P. Klein: Yeah, GASO for everyone. Let's get it!

J. Tyree: That's right. [both laugh]

Can you share with us exactly what you do in relation to the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline and how the helpline fits in with this annual event?

P. Klein: Yeah, absolutely. So I am the helpline coordinator, so I take care of day-to-day things that have to do with the helpline. I call myself customer service, so if anyone has any situation arise, good or bad, I want to hear about it. I want to help anyone who's trying to use our services and is running into any barriers. That's what I'm here for. I also just take care of the logistical things, and I've been doing it for a while. In regards to the helpline and GASO, so, you know, the Great American Smokeout is the day where we want folks to make a quit attempt, and we hope the helpline will be a resource to help people do that.

J. Tyree: A lot of people have heard of the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline. In particular, I love the new commercials we're seeing now that talk about the [450,000 stories](#). I think that's really cool. But not everyone may know exactly how it works. So when someone calls 1-800-QUIT-NOW or when they visit the website at okhelpline.com, what exactly happens and how does the helpline work?

P. Klein: Yeah. Those are really good questions, and I think knowing what to expect kind of eases people's anxiety or apprehension to using our services. So if you call us, you can expect

that those first about 10, maybe 15 minutes, you're going to go through like a registration process. We're going to get some demographic information, some tobacco use history, we're going to talk to you about what services we offer, get you set up for that, and if you choose any of our programs that come with a coach, then you'll be offered the opportunity to be directly connected to a coach at that time, or if you don't have time, then we'll call you back. We'll schedule a time for a coach to call you back. But usually I tell folks give yourself like 30 minutes for that registration and that first phone call with a coach, you can knock that out the first time that you call us or if you've been referred to us.

Now, if you come through us through the website, and you can actually sign up for our phone program through the website, and when you do that, we're going to just call you. You gave us a date and time or a best time to call you, so we're going to start reaching out to you and calling you at a number that you gave us. When you go online, you can select our web program or programs that don't involve a phone call. It's pretty simple and easy, just a couple of clicks to get you through registration that you may have normally done over the phone if you did that program, then you're set up to start getting whatever you selected from online. So it's pretty simple. But again, you know, if anyone has questions, that's what I'm here for.

J. Tyree: So what programs does the helpline offer?

P. Klein: For the phone program, all Oklahomans can call 1-800-QUIT-NOW. You get at least one call with a quit coach and at least two weeks of nicotine replacement therapies or NRT, and those options are patches, gum or lozenge.

J. Tyree: Mhm.

P. Klein: And with that — so if you choose the coaching program, you can add more stuff to support you, like texting and email program and our web coach program. So you can add everything, get all of our stuff that way.

Now, let's say you're someone who's like, "I don't really want to do the phone thing. I'd like stuff online." We have a web coach program for you. You can chat live with a coach on there. There's different tools on there for you to use. You can see how much you save. You set your quit date. You make a quit plan. So you can do all of that on web coach. You're going to get two weeks of nicotine replacement therapy shipped to you, and you can also choose to add the text program.

So lastly, you can choose to just get a quit guide from us, just get a starter kit of two weeks of NRT, just get our email program, or you can choose to get all of those. That's kind of like your mix and — dip your toes into making a quit attempt with us, and then, hopefully, you may want to upgrade and come back and try our coaching program to get a little bit more support.

J. Tyree: Okay. I like how there is a variety of things that people can do. They can choose which way is best for them it sounds like.

P. Klein: Yeah!

J. Tyree: So that's terrific.

P. Klein: We just really want to meet people where they're at. That's really what this is about.

J. Tyree: That's fantastic, Po. So tell me, how effective is the helpline, and what are some reasons for some of the past successes you've had?

P. Klein: So when you use the helpline, especially like our coaching program, you double your chances of successfully quitting, and especially when you add nicotine replacement therapy. Not a whole lot of folks can just quit cold turkey, so that's why the helpline — we want to make sure people are getting some form of nicotine replacement therapy to get them started, and I should say that you can use all of our programs twice in a 12-month period, so technically if you finish one round. You can come back and get another two weeks of NRT.

J. Tyree: Mhm. So finally, how long have you been the helpline coordinator here in Oklahoma, and what do you like most about your job?

P. Klein: Oh, very good questions. I have actually been the helpline coordinator for just a little over seven years, and I've actually been in tobacco treatment for — every time I think about this, another year gets added, so whatever 2008 is to now, so that's 10—

J. Tyree: 12 years ago.

P. Klein: 12 years, yeah, I've been in tobacco treatment in some capacity. What I love so much about this position is being able to help people overcome an addiction — overcome an addiction that has maybe had health consequences, and seeing them succeed in making that attempt, or maybe I get you on the phone, you need something, being able to support you and motivate you to say, “Hey come use us again.” And my motto since 2008 has always been “never quit quitting,” and I tell that to everyone I talk to, because you never know when that quit attempt will be your last one.

J. Tyree: Yeah. I love that motto: never quit quitting. It's simple yet powerful.

P. Klein: Thanks. [laughs]

J. Tyree: Indeed, and speaking of thanks, thank you for your time with us. I greatly appreciate it. I think you've helped people understand a bit more about the helpline, how it works, which is really nice, not only for the Great American Smokeout, but throughout the year. Thank you so much.

P. Klein: Yeah, thanks for having me.

[10:19]

J. Tyree: You know Cate, I really appreciate how the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline understands that there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach to helping people quit tobacco, and so the Helpline designs several options that individuals can choose from for themselves. And I understand that another person who totally gets the need to meet individuals – especially younger ones – where they are is Jeff Jordan.

C. Howell: Yeah. Jeff actually started Rescue when he was a young person in high school. He's a really interesting guy. There are lots of reasons why teens use tobacco and it's really unique to the individual, so this is an area where Jeff saw the tobacco industry taking advantage of youth and anti-tobacco marketing wasn't really as effective as it could be. So he launched Rescue, and together, TSET and Rescue have done some next-level work to help turn teens off of tobacco.

[11:19]

C. Howell: Okay, we are here now with Jeff Jordan, the president and executive creative director of the [Rescue Agency](#) based out of San Diego, California. Hello, Jeff. Thank you for joining us.

Jeff Jordan: Hello, Cate. Happy to be here.

C. Howell: So, can you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you got involved with Rescue?

J. Jordan: Yeah, happy to. So I founded Rescue almost 20 years now when I was in high school. I volunteered for my local health department's anti-tobacco program for teens. I volunteered for about a year, and they were working with a local kind of traditional advertising agency that didn't know a ton about teens and didn't really differentiate much between the teens who were actually at risk of smoking and the teens who probably would never smoke in their life no matter what this campaign did. And so it was that experience that inspired me to start Rescue, more so from an understanding of, hey, everybody's not the same, and we need to use different strategies to reach different people, and we can't just use these kind of one-size-fits-all's for big age groups like teenagers. And so, started Rescue a year after starting my volunteering there when I was 17. Initially focused on youth tobacco prevention, but we've grown a lot ever since into a lot more topics in a lot more populations, but that's where we started.

C. Howell: Okay, so you started this in high school.

J. Jordan: Yep. [both laugh]

C. Howell: That's real commitment. What pulled you to anti-tobacco advocacy?

J. Jordan: Funny enough, the tobacco side wasn't really what drew me in. What I was more passionate about was marketing and branding and kind of youth culture and how all of these things intertwine. Where my passion came from was, you know, I had a lot of friends who smoked, a lot of friends who did other things that were unhealthy, and I was frustrated that there were a lot of different industries taking advantage of teens in ways

that could have lifelong consequences. I thought it was normal for teenagers to experiment and to do things and be rebellious and all of that, and I thought it wasn't fair that there were companies like the tobacco industry that were taking advantage of teens' developing brains' inability to kind of make clear decisions with things that would possibly lead to a lifelong addiction, to cancer, to other negative health consequences. So for me, it was more about protecting the beauty of adolescent rebellion, and that it shouldn't lead to a lifelong consequence.

C. Howell: Well, thank you for what you do, for creating Rescue, it's really cool organization. And thank you for partnering with TSET. That's really exciting. Can you talk a little bit about some of the ways that TSET and Rescue have come together?

J. Jordan: Yeah, absolutely. So we actually started working with TSET almost 10 years ago on some young adult tobacco prevention and some programs to encourage bars to be smoke-free. A lot of great success with that, a program called Free The Night that helped over 40 bars and clubs become smoke-free.

And this new opportunity — TSET wanted to do more with teen vaping. Teen vaping has been growing exponentially around the country. I'm gonna bust some myths real quick: this growth in teen vaping is absolutely not teens who would have otherwise smoked cigarettes. We know from the data that most of these teens who are vaping are teens who would not have used any tobacco product at all, but chose to start vaping largely because of the popularity of certain products, like JUUL and now more like Puff Bars and things like that, that have really been designed to target teens. So we have this new generation that's getting addicted to nicotine that would not have gotten addicted to nicotine had it not been for vapes. TSET wanted to do something about that, and we had programs already existing in a number of other states that would help them tackle this in a very efficient and quick-response kind of way.

C. Howell: Yeah, that was going to be my next question: what are some myths about vaping? So that was one, that these are kids who would have smoked anyway and they just pick up a vape, but there's actually a whole different appeal to people who would otherwise have not started smoking.

J. Jordan: Yeah.

C. Howell: What are some other ones that you can think of, and what are the facts?

J. Jordan: One of the biggest myths is that vapes are somehow also helping teens quit cigarettes, which we see very, very little evidence of. In public health, we look at a lot of kind of coexisting risk factors, things like income and education levels, and whether a parent smokes or not, you know, all these other variables that tell us whether a teen is likely or not likely to begin smoking themselves. What we've seen is that a lot of the teens who have started vaping are teens who really should not have been at risk of smoking cigarettes to begin with. There are all these kind of variables that are confirming that this is a new trend, and what we know anecdotally is, you know, looking at the marketing that's gone on with folks like JUUL, they really made it fashionable and cool to

vape. Vaping first started with higher risk teens that were using these mods in these older styles of vapes, but then JUUL came around and totally changed it, and what we saw was a whole different group of teens starting to take on vaping that would not have otherwise. So that's kind of our biggest pushback is that we don't want teens to smoke cigarettes or vape, and we're happy to put messages out there for both of those things.

You know, the teenage brain is highly susceptible to nicotine addiction, and you're putting in nicotine in it while it's still forming, which means it could literally form around the nicotine, creating an addiction that's much stronger than if someone started smoking, say, when they were like 25 years old. So it is — it's really scary, and we really want to prevent it.

And then in terms of myths on vapes themselves, I think one of the most interesting thing about vaping science is that the vape itself creates a chemical reaction. A lot of people focus in on, "Well, what are the ingredients of vape juice?" And most of them tend to have a pretty simple list of ingredients, and then they say, "Well, this simple list of ingredients doesn't seem that harmful." But then what scientists look at is what happens when those ingredients go through a heating process of 200, 300 degrees, or however hot that the vape gets to turn it into this chemical vapor. At that point, there's all these chemical reactions that create much more harmful chemicals, in addition to metal particles from the coil itself, and all of these things that are happening. So the actual vapor coming out of a vape is much more dangerous than the vape juice that goes into the vape. We're literally measuring the vapor and we're finding all these chemicals that are really harmful, that could potentially cause cancer, could affect your brain, could do all these different things.

C. Howell: Wow. I had never heard that the reaction itself is more harmful than what goes in. That's interesting.

J. Jordan: Yeah, and even some of the chemicals that are believed in vape juice to be benign because they exist in other things that maybe we eat or so, everything we know about them is ingesting something, putting something into your stomach is actually very different from inhaling something. People are trying to equate things like, "Oh, this one chemical exists naturally in certain foods." It's like, "Well, yeah. Well, you don't smoke that food — "

C. Howell: [laughs]

J. Jordan: You eat that food." Your lung is not your stomach, and it treats things very differently, and the more we learn, the riskier it is, the scarier it is, and then also the lack of regulations that exist around vapes makes it really hard to know exactly which vapes are delivering what kind of chemicals.

C. Howell: Mm. Mhm. So one common myth that I have heard is vaping helps people quit smoking.

J. Jordan: Mhm.

C. Howell: And there's individuals who are like, "I used to be a smoker, now I vape. I've tried the gum, I tried the patches. It doesn't work for me. Vaping has helped me quit smoking, even though now I vape every day." What do you say to people like that?

J. Jordan: Yeah, so if you were a heavy smoker and you have switched over to vapes, the science says that, most likely, you are now doing a less harmful behavior. However, it does not mean that the behavior you're doing is harm-free. Keep in mind a lot of what we know about cigarettes we know from decades of research, right? Like today, we have no idea what happens to someone who vapes for 30 years because nobody has vaped for 30 years. So there's absolutely no way to know what that consequence is. And a lot of the consequences we're starting to figure out are shorter term consequences that if we extrapolate that over years and years and years kind of scare us a little bit about what could be coming.

That being said, it is probably better than smoking cigarettes. There are likely less chemicals. There are likely fewer health consequences. But it is by far not harm-free. There's very little evidence that it is an effective cessation tool, and what I mean by cessation is stopping nicotine altogether. That's why vapes are not officially designated by the FDA as a cessation tool, even though vapes can be a replacement for cigarettes for some people. So that's also important to separate out.

Furthermore, we shouldn't use the fact that some people are vaping instead of using cigarettes to excuse teenage vape, right? So, that's fine, if you want to vape and because your only two options are either smoke cigarettes or vape, okay, fine, go ahead and vape, but don't use that as an excuse to say, "Oh, now teenagers, it's okay if they vape too, because they would otherwise be smoking." No, none of that is true. They should not be vaping. They should not be smoking. We should not allow our next generation to be addicted to nicotine.

C. Howell: Right, because that developing brain thing is so important to keep in mind, you know, even if you say vaping is less harmful or whatever. It's like, well, yeah, but they're still not really old enough to be making those kind of decisions and it will have lifelong effects.

J. Jordan: Yeah.

C. Howell: So why do young people start vaping early on?

J. Jordan: Well, probably a lot of reasons there. Teenage rebellion is — it is what it is. Teenagers want to experiment, want to do different things, and they kind of form different tolerances of how much they want to rebel. So you have some more high-risk teens who are willing to rebel with harder drugs and riskier illegal behaviors and all of that, and vape just kind of gets thrown into the mix, and those are teens who probably would have also experimented with cigarettes, but that's a small group of teens. A much bigger group of teens is a group that is trying to balance what they want to protect in their life, such as their grades, their relationship with their parents, their family situation, et cetera, maybe even their status as a role model to their siblings, all of that stuff — is

trying to balance that with a desire to rebel somewhat, and this is where you kind of weigh the difference between staying out past curfew versus using a hard drug. They probably wouldn't use a hard drug, but they would be willing to stay out past curfew. What we've seen is for this middle ground of teens that want to rebel but not rebel too much that vaping was introduced to them as an acceptable level of risk. So even though they were not willing to smoke cigarettes anymore, that was passé, they were not willing to do other drugs, but they were willing to go out past curfew or maybe ditch class once in a while or something like that, vaping got clumped with those things as kind of like a not-too-big-of-a-deal way to rebel, and that's why vaping exploded within teens is because it was seen as this low-risk way to rebel. And so what we've been trying to do is for that group of teens who otherwise does not want to put themselves at risk health-wise and does not want a lifelong addiction, does not want a lot of these things, that's where we see a lot of opportunity to change their mind, to say, "No, vapes are not an acceptable level of risk. They're an unacceptable level of risk, and I'm going to move them out from my options of ways to rebel."

C. Howell: Mhm. So what are some of the ways that you do that? Or what are some successful campaigns that you've launched?

J. Jordan: First and foremost, we do tons of research on the messages themselves. We want to know exactly where this fact is coming from. We want to be absolutely sure that the information we're sharing is true. We don't want to use any kind of scare tactics or exaggerate things. And if you go to the website for [Behind The Haze](#), which is the main vaping prevention campaign we're doing with TSET, it is a plethora of information. If you were a teenager and you were assigned to do a paper on the risks of vaping, all you have to do is go to this website because there's all the citations and everything are there.

And then secondly, we do research with teens to see what is most motivating to them, like what are some of the consequences of vape that would convince them that it's not an acceptable level of risk, and it is those shorter term health consequences that we've seen the biggest impact from.

So for example, right now, we have an ad called [Defenseless](#) that is running in Oklahoma with TSET, and the ad focuses on the fact that the chemicals in vape actually weaken your lungs, and weaker lungs are more likely to allow a virus to infect them. So this could be a virus like the cold virus, the flu virus, and we're now starting to see new evidence that it could be COVID as well. So by showing this, we don't want to just tell teens like, "Hey, vaping is bad for you. You shouldn't do it." We actually don't tell them what to do. We tell them the science and let them make that decision for themselves. So we show them, "Look, this is what vapes do to your lungs." It actually kind of has this almost burning effect to your protective layer on your lungs, which makes it easier for a virus to get in, and so vapes could leave you defenseless and then we let them make the choice of like, "Okay, so is that acceptable to you or not?" And what we see is that a lot of them are shocked to learn this information, and they don't want to get sick, so they're choosing to try and quit or to just not start.

C. Howell: Well, that is fascinating and really original thinking. I appreciate so much your perspective. Thank you so much, Mr. Jordan, for coming on our podcast. We really appreciate it.

J. Jordan: Absolutely. Thank you for having me. And yeah, and go check out the campaign at behindthehaze.com.

[26:11]

C. Howell: So Jeff and I talked about some myths and facts, but here are some stats from the Center for Tobacco Free Kids: Nearly 20% of high school students use e-cigarettes. Every day in Oklahoma, 1,300 kids under 18 try smoking for the first time. Kids are three times more sensitive to tobacco advertising than adults, and are actually more likely to be influenced to smoke by cigarette marketing than by peer pressure, which is another common myth. And like Jeff said, we don't know all of the long-term effects of vaping because it just hasn't been around for that long, so this is a really important issue to not only study, but to prevent.

J. Tyree: Wow. That makes me very happy, even happier than before, prouder than before, that we're launching this Healthy Youth Initiative to help with younger people because of the very stats that you just mentioned and the many lives that it affects, you know?

C. Howell: Yeah, for sure.

J. Tyree: But I think it's also good that — you know, we agreed when planning this episode that we should hear from an educator here in Oklahoma if we could who sees and deals with youth tobacco use, especially vaping, close up. I feel fortunate that we—and now our listeners—will get to hear from Jen Sanders of Tulsa Public Schools. As physical education coordinator for the large district, she is active in all phases of wellness including that of tackling vape and tobacco use from her various committees that she works with. We had a great conversation about that, so let's listen now.

[27:51]

J. Tyree: Hello, Jen, and thank you so much for your time. We really appreciate it.

Jen Sanders: James, it's nice to be here, and I'm excited about this podcast.

J. Tyree: All right. Well, you know, most people, myself included, normally associate sports with your title of assistant athletics director, but it now seems to me that you really care about the overall physical well-being of all kids in Tulsa. After all, you do coordinate physical education in your school district. What are some of the things you do in your job to make that happen?

J. Sanders: James, you know, here at Tulsa we all are one team together and we really do care about our kids' well-being, not just our athletes, but the overall student here in Tulsa Public Schools, and I kind of do wear two hats. I'm the assistant director of athletics and

activities, so I do help many of our student athletes, but I'm also the physical education coordinator. We start those kiddos out in Pre-K teaching them the healthy lifestyles that they need to lead in order to have a well-balanced life, and to also understand what being healthy means. Yeah, so I do a little bit of both. I am the physical education coordinator, so I coordinate all of our professional development and things like that for all of our PE teachers and all of our sites, elementary and secondary.

J. Tyree: Okay, that's good to know. You know, part of keeping students healthy — covers a wide range of things, Jen, but of course, this includes preventing and stopping tobacco use and vaping, which has really shot up among youth and recent years. What have you seen and heard about this in your schools, and do you think this is a serious problem?

J. Sanders: I do think it's a serious problem, not just here in Tulsa, but everywhere in the world is what I would say. We have noticed an uptick in students who are trying tobacco through vaping and e-cigarettes. We have noticed that it is also harder to detect. You know, 20 years ago, 15 years ago, as a coach or a teacher, you knew a kid that [was] maybe possibly smoking or using tobacco products because cigarettes smell, and teachers were able to identify that and check in on kids, make sure that maybe they're just in a household where folks smoke. But with vaping, it's been difficult because the smells are not there, and students are easily able to hide vape pens and e-cigarettes because they do look like technology devices such as Bluetooth or thumb drive or anything like that.

We know that we are not unlike any other city where vaping and e-cigarettes has made a huge uptick in students trying tobacco products, but also becoming addicted to them as well. So we've had many student athletes, we've had many students that have tried it. We know that. We're not, you know, sticking our head in the sand, but we also are beginning to try to educate our students on the harmful substances that they're putting into their bodies. We have many coaches that present to our student athletes of how dangerous it is being a student athlete, but then also, you know, in our younger kids, second, third, fourth graders, that we want them to know the dangers as well, and we want to try to combat them even trying a vape or an e-cigarette as they become young students and young adults.

J. Tyree: Yeah. Yeah, that's so important. You know, I know that you have worked with the TSET Healthy Living Program and others in your communities to try and reduce tobacco use, vaping, and for that, we thank you big time. Can you share with us what steps are being done in Tulsa schools to address this problem? You kind of touched on that a little bit.

J. Sanders: It kind of started back in June 2019 when Brian King was the keynote speaker for the Fit 2 Learn conference here in Tulsa. We invited all of our teachers, administrators, all of those folks. We had quite a few members of the Team Tulsa that attended that conference, and Brian King pretty much predicted what we are seeing now, which is this huge uptick of student athletes, students, and even younger students, you know, fifth, sixth, seventh grade that have tried or are trying tobacco products, so he said in that keynote address that this is going to become a huge problem, and we have noticed that. So what we did was we — actually Vicki Wagner videotaped the keynote address and she also videotaped the breakout sessions which helped teachers to better understand how to identify kiddos that are possibly trying vaping and then understand the behaviors

of why. She was able to get those videotapes, and we sent those out to all of our physical education teachers throughout the district and also all of our nurse aides. We also created a link where administrators could also check those videos out. So we really started in 2019 going, "Okay, this may be a problem in a couple of years."

And then, of course, last February — this actually may have been the last professional learning session we had with all of our physical education teachers in person, and in fact, I know it probably was — so last February, Vicki came into one of our high schools and presented regarding e-cigarettes and vaping and the statistics and how to identify students that have a problem with it and where students can go from there and how they can get help. I will say I think the question-and-answer session that Vicki had at the end was the most important part. Definitely all the statistics and the things that she shared with us was important, but for our teachers to be able to ask questions about how and when and what do I do when I see a kid — you know, obviously we know the disciplinary actions that we take at the school level, but the other side of it is, how do I get this kid some help who's now tried vaping and is now addicted? So we worked with the Tobacco Helpline to get students help. We also have counselors in each of our schools that are able to offer help to our students should they need it. And we know that if you are vaping regularly that you are likely addicted, and you will be needing some help in order to get off of the nicotine.

J. Tyree: Yeah.

J. Sanders: So we work — like I said, the health department, Vicki Wagner, Dr. King, you know, like I said, we've been working on this for a while, and we don't have our students in session right now, our secondary students, so we're unable to identify those kids that may need help with getting off of the nicotine and tobacco, but we know that we will see them soon, and we're still continually emphasizing in our younger grades tobacco prevention and educating those students on the dangers of just trying vaping or trying an e-cigarette and what that looks like.

J. Tyree: Yeah, yeah. I'm so glad that you're paying such attention and devoting such energy on this and it sounds like you're doing so for students and kids of all ages, so that's really good. Just want to mention for folks out there, of course, Vicki Wagner is with the TSET Healthy Living Program in Tulsa County and the Tulsa Health Department, and as you and I both know, Jen, she is pretty passionate about this topic, isn't she? [laughs] That's for sure.

J. Sanders: For sure, yes. And Vicki, you know, is just — she has a way of definitely engaging a group of people and transferring that passion to those teachers. I will say when we left our professional learning session with Vicki, many teachers said, "You know, I know of kid that has trouble and I'm going to go talk to that kid," so I think that passion that she has within her she exudes on others as well.

J. Tyree: Yeah. I was going to ask, you know, since this has taken place over the past a little over a year, 2019, you mentioned some reaction from teachers after hearing Vicki speak. Have you heard any other feedback from students perhaps on this information or some other teachers on this very important information here?

J. Sanders: I have heard from teachers. We have heard from administrators in regards to what it looks like when we do catch a kid vaping and how we can possibly help that kid rather than just, you know, obviously, punish them, but get them some true help. Unfortunately, we have been virtual or this in-distance learning since March, so we have not heard from many students. That is something we probably do need to think about, surveying our students. Our athletic trainers have definitely had some conversations with student athletes about the dangers of vaping, and I think now with COVID-19, raises even more concern as to students who may possibly be addicted to vaping or thinking about trying it for their first time. As much as we do not like COVID-19, hopefully think that students would think twice about trying it in regards to damaging their lungs.

J. Tyree: Absolutely. And finally, Jen, students are home a lot more, virtual learning because of this pandemic, and of course, they're home a lot under normal circumstances, too. Do you have any words of advice or encouragement for parents or caretakers when it comes to youth vaping and tobacco use?

J. Sanders: I would say to parents, stay vigilant. Be aware of what your student athletes or students are doing at all times. I know that's difficult. When you see a student reaching into their pocket and pulling out a Bluetooth device or something along those lines, question it. You know, "What's that? Let me see that." Because, you know, that is one of the things that is difficult for parents to catch kids because they don't know what these devices look like. And if you don't know what they look like, please reach out to our office. We'd happy to send out some flyers as to what vaping pens look like and how to identify your kids that are struggling with it and things like that. But I would say many of our parents are doing that, and they are vigilant, and they are, you know, want the best for their kids.

And coaches — we tell coaches all the time, like — same thing. Stay vigilant. Make sure you really get to know your kids. Develop those relationships that give a kid an opportunity to come to the coach and say, "Hey, I have a problem and I need help with it. I don't want to diminish my playing time, and I don't want to hurt myself physically, and I want to be, you know, a healthy person." And our coaches that are able to build those relationships are the ones that students will come to and say, "Hey, I need some help."

So that's what I would say is just stay vigilant. You know, keep your eye on your kids, and when they do come to you for help, like, "let's talk through that," and figure out a way that they can get a hold of the helpline and get some help, or even contact one of our counselors who can offer some help as well.

J. Tyree: That's very good advice not only for parents and caretakers and students in Tulsa but throughout the state. You know, we have educators, local educators, who care a great deal about our kids, and so yes, that's very good. Thank you, and thank you for your time. We really appreciate it.

J. Sanders: Thank you James. It was nice to be here today.

[38:42]

J. Tyree: It is so good to hear about local partnerships, especially those who work with the TSET Healthy Living Program, who really band together to protect the health and well-being of all Oklahomans, but especially our youth. And that's what TSET has been about at the statewide level for nearly 20 years.

C. Howell: Yeah, that's for sure. And on that note, to close us out today is the incomparable Julie Bisbee, TSET executive director. 2020 marks the 20th anniversary since TSET's creation, so she popped in to give us a little rundown of TSET's history, evolution, and why today's topics are so important.

[39:25]

C. Howell: Hey there listeners, thank you for joining us. We are here right now with Julie Bisbee, who's the executive director of TSET. Julie, thank you so much for coming on today.

Julie Bisbee: Yeah, thanks for having me.

C. Howell: So you have been our fearless leader here at TSET for how long now?

J. Bisbee: Well, it will be two years in the spring. So, started out as the public information officer, worked as the director of public information, served as the interim director, and then went through the process as the board did their search and was named the executive director in April of 2019.

C. Howell: We're interesting agency, right? Because we were created in the year 2000 by voters. So, actually, 2020 is kind of our 20th anniversary. I know that's two decades to try to cram into 10 minutes, but can you give us like a — just a brief overview of how TSET started and how far we've come?

J. Bisbee: Yeah. Sure. So, Oklahoma was one of 46 states that sued Big Tobacco in the late 90's for harms that were brought to the state because the tobacco industry lied and colluded together to suppress information that cigarettes were addictive and secondhand smoke was toxic. And so we were one of those states that sued, and rather than going to court, Big Tobacco decided to enter into what we call the Master Settlement Agreement. For Oklahoma, that meant that we would get an annual payment as part of that settlement, basically a penalty payment to the industry. And what the legislature did at the time was looked for a way to safeguard those payments or a good majority of the payments that come to the state for future health needs, and Oklahoma voters thought that was a good idea as well and passed an amendment to the state's constitution that created the TSET endowment.

C. Howell: We've done a lot over the last 20 years. What would you say are our top three most major accomplishments?

J. Bisbee: Top three. I like these kind of questions.

C. Howell: Yeah, it's hard to narrow down.

J. Bisbee: You know, I think first and foremost, you have to look at our rate of smoking by adults and also youth. Youth smoking has been cut in half, and adult smoking in our state is at an all-time low, and that's happening independent of sort of recommended policies that we know other states have: smoke-free air laws, additional price increases on cigarettes. We are operating in a state that is very similar to Tennessee in how we allow local entities to regulate cigarette smoking. Mayors and city councils can't decide that all restaurants in a given area should be smoke-free. Smoke-free policies help people quit, most importantly protect the public from a secondhand smoke, but also help smokers stay quit. Tobacco use and smoking: that is something that people struggle with their entire life, and so the less that they are around it, the less temptation is available, the more they are able to stay on their goal of quitting. In Oklahoma, we've seen our youth smoking cut half. We have record low adult smoking. So that would be one.

We have a top ranked helpline. Lots of states have a helpline. The Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline is one of the top ranked in the nation by a national group that evaluates helplines for reaching people who are in need of help, and also for the types of benefits and the success rates that we have. We are providing not only free counseling, but nicotine replacement therapy for folks who register for multiple calls, and so we're really setting up people to succeed in that way.

Another thing that our state should be really proud of is that all of our school campuses are tobacco-free, vapor-free by law. That was something that our early community-based grants took on, and they went school board to school board to educate about the importance of policy to reinforce the environment that you want to create for children, patrons and staff. That was a top priority for those local grants for probably almost a decade or more, and there got to be a point where nearly 80% of school districts had policies in place, and at that point the legislature — Lee Denney and Jim Halligan out of Stillwater — they saw that and ran a bill and passed a law so that all Oklahoma children were protected from tobacco use. Years later, as we've seen vapor use become very widespread at an alarming rate at our schools, another law was passed that added vapor-free to that. So we have policies in place, and that really came from the grassroots, and that was a commitment to improving and changing the environment for the next generation.

And then I think another accomplishment that really is worth highlighting is TSET has funded the Stephenson Cancer Center, and they are now recognized by the National Cancer Institute as an NCI facility. That means that they are eligible for more research, more cutting-edge treatments that are going to help Oklahomans, you know, kind of have new avenues for treatment, and also it's raising the level of care for folks in Oklahoma who are seeking cancer treatment. They can get cutting-edge care without having to leave the state, and I think that that is truly, truly something that we needed in our state, and I'm super excited and proud that TSET got to be a part of that as one of the anchor funders to say, "We believe in this promise. This is part of our constitutional mandate. We want to be a part of it."

C. Howell: Yeah, that's so awesome. We talked with Dr. Robert Mannel on our last episode of the podcast about that. He was so proud of that.

That's a lot of stuff, Julie. [laughs]

J. Bisbee: Yeah. Yeah, and I think, you know, I think it's important. I mean, we have grants and programs we are very, very proud of, but one of the things that TSET has done across the state is really bring people together to talk about health. We are creating these conversation points where folks are having to say, "What does it mean to be healthy? What's my personal role in helping to promote health for my family, my environment? What are the policies that are in place that support health or make it harder for me to make a healthy decision?" And really looking at that and making meaningful change for Oklahomans. I really believe, you know, improving health, obviously being tobacco-free, supporting tobacco-free environments, but it is also modeling for that next generation to say it's important to get out and get your physical activity, it's important to be hydrated, it's important to have access to preventative screening. We've really looked across the whole spectrum with our constitutional mandate in mind to say, "Where are there gaps, where are there opportunities, and how can we bring people together to address them?"

C. Howell: I love that. I love that you're bringing the whole state together, every corner of the state to look at every corner of health.

J. Bisbee: Absolutely, and that's what you'll see with our current Healthy Living Program is that they're doing a lot of data collection at the local level right now. They just started a new five-year program in July with the express interest to say, "In our communities, how can we address those inequities, because if we're not addressing inequities, we're not moving health forward for everyone."

C. Howell: Absolutely. Absolutely. That's wonderful.

You mentioned youth vaping earlier and how it has exploded in schools and that TSET has been part of the initiative to create a no-vaping campus for public schools. Can you talk a little bit about youth vaping and why it's important to continue to monitor it?

J. Bisbee: Sure, sure. Yeah, so over the last probably five years, we've seen the rate of youth vaping really grow exponentially. Part of that is that the federal government failed to regulate it at the time, and the companies saw an opportunity, taking a page from a Big Tobacco playbook, to market to youth. They did that through social media. They did that through peer crowds. Unfortunately, we have a lot of young people who do not understand the risks of an ongoing nicotine addiction.

What we have with vapor products is they're flavored. The flavors attract kids to these products, and the nicotine keeps them, and I think that that's really important for us to talk about. Nicotine is as addictive as heroin — I mean, we've seen that shown in research — and we know that nicotine impacts the developing brain. We also know from our research with smoking that smokers who start at a young age while their brain

is still developing have a much harder time quitting because those neural pathways have been cemented.

And so the TSET board of directors have put together a three-phase TSET Healthy Youth Initiative, and we've launched the first phase this past summer which includes educational commercials, social media.

We're hoping to launch a youth empowerment effort, so kind of helping influencers and these peer crowds educate their peers or to model in their communities and their schools that vapor use is not the norm. And so that's kind of where we are at. We have also launched My Life My Quit, which is a text-based platform that allows youth to text to get help to quit vaping.

You know, we hear stories about kids who can't make it through a class period without vaping, or upon waking up need to vape. That's an addiction. That's not something that we would want to see, and we talk a lot kind of internally about the strides that we made in reducing youth smoking are being eclipsed by the record increase in youth vaping.

And in Oklahoma, we don't license these products. We don't regulate them like a tobacco product. We don't tax them like a tobacco product. And so there are some opportunities for some really substantive conversations about, "How can we improve the environment so that we're supporting young people in making healthy choices that will get them to where they want to be as adults?"

C. Howell: There's so many myths and misconceptions about youth vaping and vaping in general. There's lots of conflicting messages. So I'm really glad that TSET is out there firm-handed saying, "This is how it is."

J. Bisbee: Yeah, you know, the research is developing. There's research that looks at how nicotine use alters your DNA, so your nicotine addiction becomes something that impacts multiple generations through your DNA, much like we've seen how long-term trauma can impact your DNA. So I think it definitely is still developing, but what we know hard and fast is that nicotine is not good for the developing brain, and it's not for kids.

C. Howell: Right. Well, Julie, thank you so much, today, for meeting with us — and for everything you do, frankly. Thank you for being the leader that TSET needs.

J. Bisbee: Oh, well, thank you. I appreciate that.

[52:26]

C. Howell: Such a rich history at TSET, one that we will delve into soon in an upcoming episode — not only looking back at the past 20 years, but also what we can look forward to as TSET continues to fund programs and research that will continue to reduce cancer and cardiovascular disease in Oklahoma by lowering obesity and tobacco use rates.

J. Tyree: We look forward to bringing you that and so much more down the road. But for now, we say goodbye, reminding you that you can hear this or any podcast on the TSET website or wherever you listen to podcasts.

So until next time, this is James Tyree –

C. Howell: – and Cate Howell.

J. Tyree: Wishing you peace –

C. Howell: – and Better Health.

[Theme music]

[53:25]