

TSET Better Health Podcast Transcript

Episode 49: Health Trends and Programs To Be Thankful For

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Summary: In this season of Thanksgiving and the holidays, Episode 49 shines a warm glow upon health programs and trends in Oklahoma to be thankful for. Project ECHO Director Dr. Tara Jackson explains how the international program extends health and medical expertise to underserved areas in Oklahoma through tele-mentoring, and Cushing Asst. Superintendent Mike Wayland shares how the new Tiger Trail connects community members and all Cushing schools with physical activity.

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[Theme music]

James Tyree: Hello everyone; welcome to Episode 49 of the TSET Better Health Podcast. This is your host James Tyree, associate director of Integrated Communications at TSET ...

Sarah Carson: And I'm Sarah Carson, campaign manager for TSET. Thank you for joining us today. We always appreciate our listeners and certainly do so now, in this season of giving thanks.

J. Tyree: Well said and, in fact, that is the theme of today's episode, "Health Trends and Programs To Be Thankful For." We often hear of Oklahoma ranking in the bottom 10 among states in this area or that, and it often is the case with important health outcomes. But it's not all doom and gloom, and some of the good news is resulting from TSET's long- and short-term impacts.

S. Carson: We can be thankful for the state's all-time low rates of cigarette smoking among both adults and youth, which are 15.8 and 4 percent, respectively. This gradual trend has taken place over years of concerned citizens, public health workers and policymakers working together. There is also incredible cutting-edge research on cancer and tobacco-related diseases, and local and statewide programs that are impacting lives now.

Today's episode will highlight an example of each – the statewide Project ECHO and a local walking trail in Cushing. I think our listeners will enjoy hearing about the purpose and progress of these projects, and how they benefit fellow Oklahomans.

J. Tyree: Let's start with a conversation we recently had with the director of Project ECHO, to learn more about that innovative program.

Tara Jackson: Well first off, thank you for inviting me here to share Project ECHO with you. So my name is Tara Jackson and I am a Doctor of Public Health and I am Director of Project ECHO at Oklahoma State University Center for Health Sciences.

Project ECHO stands for Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes. And what it is basically a tele-mentoring model with healthcare providers in rural and underserved areas so we can increase capacity and access to care in those areas.

J. Tyree: That sounds interesting, but can you tell us a little more.

T. Jackson: So ECHO stands again for Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes. And it started a long time ago in 2003 at the University of New Mexico with Dr. Sanjeev Arora, who is a liver specialist. And basically he was trying to treat hepatitis C in a rural state and there were only two providers there that could treat hepatitis C at the time and there were about 30,000 cases of hepatitis C.

So he had an eight-month waiting list to get to see him at that time. And people had to travel long distances and it was a disease that you had to go for multiple visits to get treated, but it was a treatable condition and is a treatable condition. But by the time some people got to see him, they had advanced disease and one person, one of his patients sadly passed away from this treatable condition. And at the time he just said, "I can't understand how this is possible." So he decided to develop a system to train rural physicians to be able to treat this condition. And he met with them over a virtual platform such as Zoom for one hour. And they just walked through cases and really over time they were able to be able to treat hepatitis C. and then they studied this, and the outcomes were as good, if not better in those rural communities than they were with Dr. Arora at these academic centers, these centers of excellence.

So that's kind of how ECHO started. And this was in 2003 over 20 years ago. And since it has blossomed to be a global movement, but more importantly we brought it to Oklahoma State University Center for Health Sciences in 2016. So we've been doing Project ECHO in Oklahoma for quite some time.

J. Tyree: So, in these eight years, how has the program been uniquely beneficial for Oklahoma and especially in rural areas? Do you know of any specific examples?

T. Jackson: I have many specific examples. So as you know and or may not know, but Oklahoma has a healthcare provider shortage in pretty much every county of our state in health and mental health. So what we're able to do is really take a look at those needs in those communities and throughout our state to see where we need to start helping. And so we started, we looked and when we started in 2017 with our first ECHO, again, we've started about 35 different ECHOs in different specialty care fields, so quite a few and ECHO means a certain disease condition or a certain avenue of study to go down, and I'll talk a little bit more about that later. But we started with adult mental health. We have high needs and a lot of professional shortage areas in those areas and those specialists, so we worked on and we're able to reach and then we started with addiction medicine and then we quickly segued into maternal health, all sorts of other conditions that we can talk about.

And so we've been able to serve all 77 counties and reached all those providers in 77 counties with the different ECHO lines that we've run. So that's one way to get that specialty care into those communities instead of those patients having to travel to Tulsa or Oklahoma City to get their care. But in addition, then the pandemic hit and ECHO became basically the avenue to get this rapidly disseminate information to our frontline healthcare workers in all 77 counties.

And so we were chosen by the Governor's Solution Task Force to be that method of basically getting all the data and information out to those frontline healthcare workers. We quickly went from a small group of participants to in some ECHO sessions, over 500 and up participants. And participants are those rural providers throughout the state. It's pretty expansive. Then just to let you know, we also started to work on K-12 education. But at that time, those teachers and those during the pandemic teachers and superintendents were very hungry for this kind of information, the data, etc, during the pandemic. And so we were able to push out that information to those schools and the educators also that potentially weren't receiving that data at the time during the pandemic.

J. Tyree: I thought about the origin story in New Mexico and the patients whose lives have since been saved, you know, by this program and helped. Is there any idea of about how many patients are helped here in Oklahoma through Project ECHO?

T. Jackson: It's kind of a complicated formula, but we say that every provider that attends an ECHO session can treat at least 10 patients with the information they receive during an ECHO session. ECHO is not a webinar. We're not just giving information to people and not hearing what's going on with them. ECHO is basically a dialogue with these providers, and so we learn about the context in which they're practicing in as well. So if they have different patients from different cultures that they're encountering, we can really talk about that and how to implement those best practices in those different environments.

Again, it's an all teach, all learn sort of situation. But back to your question, the idea is that, again, a physician comes to an ECHO session and we have them weekly or bi-weekly, and they're held for an hour long. And so a physician comes to a session and then with that information, they're able to learn in that session either from the brief little lecture that we give on best practices or really walking through a patient case, they're able to treat at least 10 patients. And so just think we've had over 90,000 participants in our ECHO sessions. And so if you just extrapolate that it's thousands and thousands of patients that we're able to treat with the information gained through ECHO.

J. Tyree: So when did TSET become involved with Project ECHO and what has resulted or what will result from this additional funding?

T. Jackson: So we wrote a grant in fiscal year 2024, so July 2023, we received an amount of funding to be able to start 12 new ECHO lines for our state. An ECHO line, again is a specialty area. And so with the funding from TSET, we were able to build new ECHO lines in... we didn't have any currently at that time before we received the TSET funding in diabetes

management. And we know that diabetes is on the rise in Oklahoma, and about a third of our population is pre-diabetic. So we know that we needed to help those endocrinologists and those primary care providers to be able to care for those patients and get information out into the communities.

So we were able to start the 12 different ECHO lines. We are starting a diabetes management and primary care. We were able to start a school nurses and diabetes care to really help support those school nurses that are trying working to treat type one and type two diabetes in schools and the different issues that they encounter that are unique to their school environment. We were able to start a hypertension management in primary care, a congestive heart failure. And so what we really wanted to do is work with what was TSET's mission, what is Oklahoma State University's mission, and what are the needs in our state. And so that's why we built these ECHO lines around these high need areas.

J. Tyree: I recently learned that ECHO isn't just about like doctors' offices and hospitals and things like that. There's also a new program in schools, right? And so can you tell us a little more about that?

T. Jackson: So what's so great about the ECHO model is that one, they always say it works because it's simple. And really, it looks simple, but it's not that simple. And then also that it's modifiable to different fields. Oklahoma State University was one of the first pioneers in the K through 12 education realm.

We were working with a gentleman, a professor named Dr. Ed Harris, who came to meet with us at OSU Project ECHO. And he's like, "This is a great idea. I know how we can really go and help our schools," and so increase the standard across all the schools. And so say there's a rural school that's maybe under-resourced that can be at the same level as one in a metro area that's more resourced. And so in 2018, we built one of the first education ECHOs globally. And since then, we have built six ECHOs in education and the first in Africa. And so yeah, K-12 education has a whole different set of circumstances, and the return on investment is very high with building the standards up in different schools.

J. Tyree: So with these new ECHO lines in schools, is it more to educate and work with staff or is it more to educate students or is the combination?

T. Jackson: Excellent question. So what we do is we work, like with the healthcare ECHOs, we work with the physicians and they treat the patients. So in that way it's a multiplier effect. And it's the same with education. So we will work with school superintendents to work on educational leadership. We will work with teachers to work on... we have an ECHO in special education. And then... so basically, yes, we're working with the administration and faculty in order to then get the information to the students.

J. Tyree: You had a pilot program last school year and now you're into more schools here in Oklahoma?

T. Jackson: Yes. So another fortunate thing about the TSET funding that we received through our grant was that we were able to build a couple first of its kind globally ECHO lines. We were able to partner with the Human Performance and Nutrition Research Institute at Oklahoma State University, and we were able to build again, the first of its kind athletic training and sports medicine ECHO. And so that's really looking at those K-12 schools and those schools that have student athletes and then potentially don't have athletic trainers in there. And the idea behind that is keeping kids in sports longer, keeping kids active longer, keeping them healthy longer in order to then have that impact them throughout the rest of their lives. And we know that once it starts with the athletes, that it will also go into other areas and then into PE, etc.

And then what we were really lucky to, we were able to start a pilot project and it's called Building Healthy School Communities. And again, this is another ah partnership with the eight with the Human Performance and Nutrition Research Institute and funded by TSET. And so the idea with this one is we started with five schools and we were really thinking, and they're geographically spread out across the state. We looked at all the needs in the communities, et cetera, and picked these five pilot schools to start this ECHO. And we the idea is that the school is the heart of the community.

And so if we can work with those, the school administration in those communities, um as well as the faculty, the PE instructors and give them, you know, the knowledge and resources they need to implement new programs and keep students active longer or keeping like um active classrooms, say you're teaching math and maybe we can start to do use physical activity in a classroom, those kinds of things. And so we talk about that and we really look at the nutrition aspect and the physical education aspect, as well as the ah mental health of students, as well as the you know the entire school, the faculty, etc. So we really want to increase physical and health literacy in our schools. And the idea is that potentially that will go down and trickle down into the community as well.

J. Tyree: ECHO has done a lot in a few short years. It seems that way and I'd to ask what you would like to see with the program in the upcoming year and beyond?

T. Jackson: So much. Well, we're going to continue to grow our 12 ECHO lines that we're working with TSET on and then grow our participation in those so that we can really dive deep into those communities and serve the different counties around our state. We also want to start thinking of some creative other creative ideas like the Building Healthy School Communities ECHO that we can create them in innovative ways to reach Oklahomans and ah really try to increase health outcomes and educate and education outcomes in our state. In 2025, we're also starting about six other ECHO lines and um and in education and health. So the idea is just to keep growing and get sustainability and ah really learn from our providers and educators out in the community and work with every, you know, build partnerships and work to serve Oklahoma.

J. Tyree: That's terrific. Thank you for your time, Tara; we really appreciate it and for what you and Project ECHO does for our state.

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- J. Tyree: It's amazing how far-reaching *one* program can be in improving the health and well-being of Oklahomans throughout the state, and in so many ways, Sarah.
- S. Carson: TSET funds a number of beneficial statewide health initiatives. But its grant programs also help local efforts to improve wellness. Looking back on the past year, there were – and continue to be – quite a few projects that promote safe and enjoyable physical activity. And James, you and our audio producer Sam learned more about one example in Payne County.
- J. Tyree: Yes, we recently visited Cushing to check out the Tiger Trail there. Sam and I met a school district administrator who knows a lot about the project. Let's meet him.
- Mike Wayland: My name is Mike Wayland. I'm the Assistant Superintendent here at Cushing Public Schools.
- J. Tyree: We are here because of the Tiger Trail that you have going throughout your campuses and town. Can you just tell us in a nutshell what the Tiger Trail is and how it came about?
- M. Wayland Sure. The Tiger Trail is a walking trail that will run through the town of Cushing, mainly through the campuses of our school. We started at the high school with phase one, which will go all the way across that campus and then it will connect into phase two, which will go through basically some land that is owned by the city, which we have our community ball fields, baseball fields, softball fields there. It will cut through there and then attach to our middle school. And then on phase three it will run from our middle school and attach into our elementary school.
- The way we came about with this is we found out about the grant through our city because the city had done a parks and rec grant down in our park where they had put a walking trail throughout our city park and we kind of found out about the TSET grant through them. And so we got in touch with the landscape architects that were doing the work at the city park and we talked with them and ended up writing the grant. We were fortunate enough to get the funding so we could do this project for the school and for our community.
- J. Tyree: So the funding will help pay for all three phases of this?
- M. Wayland That is correct, yes. We got funding in three different phases. First phase, actually it was about \$250,000 is what we're receiving. The phase two is a larger phase and it takes a year long for that and we're right about \$500,000 for that. And then phase three will be another six-month phase, which is another \$250,000. Right close, we're going to be just under \$1 million dollars by the time everything is said and done.

J. Tyree: Wow, that's impressive. Can you tell us why folks here decided to write for this grant in terms of the campus and the city walkability and things like that?

M. Wayland Sure. Well, I tell you it's kind of coincidental because we're in the process of building a brand new elementary school right now and our plans with that, with the new elementary schools, we wanted to build a walking trail there. We have quite a bit of land around it, so we wanted to build a walking trail where our community members could go and use it, our students could use it because we really feel it's important to keep our community as healthy as possible and that's one of the goals of ourselves and the city. So when this came around, it was just kind of automatic. We said, "Yes, we need to try to get this because this is going to help the students of our school, it's going to help our community members. And we just think overall it's just going to be a great asset to our community for the future."

J. Tyree: About what will be the approximate distance when all three phases are done?

M. Wayland All three phases being done, we believe it's going to be right at about 1.6 miles one way. So a round trip on it will be right at a little over three miles. So we're kind of excited about that. It'll also just the way it cuts through some of the neighborhoods and everything, it will be safer for our students traveling from one site to the other. And it's also great for our community members because a lot of the people like to walk early in the morning or right in the evening, and it's kind of visibilities a little bit of a problem at times. And so this way we'll be able to keep those people out of the roadways and everything and keep them safer.

J. Tyree: Very nice. So that will be helpful for pedestrian safety. It has it been popular with joggers or cyclists too?

M. Wayland: Joggers definitely have been on it. The cycling, I've seen a few, but just for the part that we don't have open yet, it makes it difficult for that. We really believe once we get phase two open, we really think it's going to open the flood gates, if you will, and people will really start utilizing it more just because it actually gives them a pathway from one area to another. And so it's going to be really beneficial at that time.

J. Tyree: The TSET grant is helping to pay for the track itself, the Tiger Trail itself, but you've had some good community buy-in and support and getting some other things too, right?

M. Wayland Yes, definitely. Throughout the walking trail, of course we have lighting and everything that was included on the grant, but they've also poured pads to where we can put benches so people can rest all throughout the trail and all. And the benches have actually come from community groups that have wanted to donate. The school, we decided that we wanted to put in some of our own benches, so we did do that. But we have some other community groups, like the Daughters of the American Revolution, have purchased some benches for us. The city of Cushing themselves are going to purchase some. Also, we have a community organization that's called, Cushing Pride,

which what they do is they spend a lot of time picking up trash throughout the community and keeping our community clean. And they have also decided to provide some benches for our walking trail as well.

J. Tyree: Very nice. So how easy, or difficult or somewhere in between is it to build such an impressive trail here in the pipeline crossroads of the world?

M. Wayland: That's just part of your daily life is dealing with the pipelines and the energy that comes through here. And they work wonderful with us. They really do. But it is different. I mean, building a sidewalk in Yukon or Edmond, it's probably not quite the issue that it is here in Cushing because when you cross a pipeline, they have to have representatives there watching to make sure if you're digging or whatever you're doing to make sure that you're doing it correctly. And it's all for our safety and for the good of our environment. So we don't have an issue with it. It just takes a little bit more time, it takes a little bit more planning. But so far, we've been very fortunate because the pipelines that we have dealt with, they've been very supportive of what we're doing, very helpful, and so we'll just continue working with them and continue to make our community better.

J. Tyree: Nice. Now I know that you have some coaching in your background, so being active is an important thing to you and to many others here in Cushing. Can you talk a little bit about how having the trail here can be beneficial for boosting physical activity for all kinds of students and community members?

M. Wayland I coached football and track here for quite some time and I believe it's very important to keep healthy. And I know that our community as a whole believes that, that's pretty high on our priority list here at Cushing. And so being able to have this is what it's going to do. We've already talked about our cross-country coach is excited because it's going to give him a new path to run students on. And again, keeping them out of the streets where they can be safe. And our older community uses it for walking and everything.

And I tell you this, My dad, 76 years old, walked two miles every day, every morning, I mean religiously. And when he turned 76, he got up one morning and he walked his two miles. Everybody said they saw him that morning waving at him and everything, and he got home and he got to the front porch and he actually, he passed away a massive heart attack. And I can remember at the time I was a little bit upset about it. I was like, he always took care of himself and tried to be healthy and all this happened.

And I can remember telling my wife's dad about that and said, "Why worry about it? We're all going to pass away at some time." And he said, "Yeah, but Mike, the difference is he walked the day he passed away." And that really hit me. And I think it's very important that we take care of our bodies and we take care of ourselves. And in that way later in life, I feel like you're going to have a better quality of life than you're going to if you don't. So I'm really excited about this because my wife and I, we like to walk

quite a bit and we can't wait for it to get done too. We want to be able to come in town and walk on it and all. So we're excited and I know the whole community is as a whole.

J. Tyree: Have you heard much feedback from either students, staff, community members about the trail so far?

M. Wayland Well, the students like it because they say, it looks cool. They've all said that they like how it goes around the pond there at the high school. And they said it kind of makes it look like a park. And they really like that. We have a group of people that walk every morning or every evening. And I can remember when we got the grant, they were some of the first people I called to let them know that. And they were so excited. And the other morning we were out there working planning out the pedestrian bridge that we're going to have to build across the creek, going to the baseball fields. And I can remember one of them was already walking on it and she came by, and she just came up and gave me a big hug and she just said, "Oh, I'm so excited for this. We can't wait for all of it to get open." And on, there's just kind of a buzz. I think people just think it's going to be a great opportunity and it's just a good thing for our community. So I know everybody's really excited for it.

J. Tyree: That's fantastic. Well, Mike, thanks so much for your time and congratulations on this beautiful addition to your school district and the community. It's wonderful.

M. Wayland: Well, thank you guys. Thank you for coming out and I mean, we're so grateful to TSET for being able to give us this opportunity and we're just glad you guys are here in Cushing because like I said, anytime we have a chance to show off our community, we're more than welcome to do that.

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S. Carson: What a compelling story, and I am so happy for the people in Cushing. This new Tiger Trail combines recreation with safety for not only the students of all Cushing schools, but also for residents of every age and ability. The community buy-in seems to be very strong, with other groups contributing to the main project funded by TSET to make the trail even better.

And I was really touched by the story about Mike's dad, and how quality of life is every bit as important, if not more so, as how long you live. It's so important to be as healthy and to feel as good as we can, for as long as we can, and this trail will play a part in helping the people of Cushing do that.

J. Tyree: And as you mentioned earlier, Sarah, 2024 has seen a number of local projects and programs in communities throughout Oklahoma that promote or encourage physical activity.

S. Carson: Yes, these stretch from new story walks in Enid and Sapulpa to new hiking and biking trails at OSU in Oklahoma City and Turkey Mountain Wilderness in Tulsa. There are also new crosswalks and plans for Safe Routes to Schools projects to improve pedestrian safety popping up in our state, all from community members working together.

If our listeners are interested in helping a school or community promote wellness, or simply want to live healthier, they should check out the Shape Your Future website at <https://shapeyourfutureok.com>. They can click on the “Get Involved,” “Get Active” or “Healthy Living 101” tab for helping tips and great ideas.

J. Tyree: We want to thank Dr. Tara Jackson of Project ECHO and Cushing Assistant Superintendent Mike Wayland for taking the time to share their program and project with us, and we definitely appreciate you joining us today.

S. Carson: We give thanks now and year-round for our audience and everyone who cares about the health and wellness of our state. Happy holidays, everyone!

J. Tyree: Be sure to join us next time for the podcast’s 50th episode! Until then, this is James Tyree wishing you peace ...

S. Carson: And better health.