

TSET Better Health Podcast Transcript

Episode 40: A State Plan and Corrective Statements to Fight Tobacco

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Summary: Tobacco use in Oklahoma costs thousands of lives and billions of dollars in health care and lost productivity each year, but a newly released state plan and federal court-ordered tobacco corrective statements at stores both aim to reduce tobacco use. Podcast episode guests Elizabeth Chery-Mullen of the Oklahoma State Department of Health tells us about the five-year state plan and what it means for Oklahomans, and TSET Communication Manager Chase Harvick discusses the history and impact of the upcoming corrective statements.

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[Theme music]

James Tyree: Hello and welcome to Episode 40 of the TSET Better Health Podcast. This is your host James Tyree, senior health communication consultant at TSET.

Dylan Jasna: And I am Dylan Jasna, a TSET Health Communication manager.

TSET is dedicated to helping Oklahomans live longer and healthier by funding initiatives to lower rates of cancer and cardiovascular disease. Increasing access to nutritional foods, physical activity and medical care are a big part of it, but reducing and preventing tobacco use in our state has always been a cornerstone of what we do. Thankfully, TSET is not alone in this effort.

J. Tyree: And along those lines, we will hear today about a newly released five-year plan for Oklahoma to reduce tobacco use, and about court-ordered corrective statements that will be placed in plain sight at stores about the harms of tobacco use. Both of these developments can really lower the rate of Oklahomans succumbing to the leading cause of preventable death in the nation. Let's hear first from someone at the Oklahoma State Department of Health who can tell us more about the state plan.

Chery-Mullen: (0:10) My name is Elizabeth Chery Mullen, and my job title is Tobacco Use Prevention and Control Manager.

J. Tyree: Thank you for joining the podcast! So what is this state plan to reduce tobacco use?

Chery-Mullen: (0:36) So the Oklahoma State Tobacco Plan shows the collaborative effort that partners in tobacco control will take to ensure all Oklahomans live in a tobacco-free state. The plans provide strategic alignment for implementing a comprehensive tobacco control program that focuses on evidence-based tobacco prevention, tobacco control, and cessation strategies. Stakeholders include partners from the public and private sectors.

J. Tyree: Who are some of these partners?

Chery-Mullen: (1:08) So the Oklahoma Tobacco Alliance, which is a statewide alliance aim at reducing tobacco use in Oklahoma, assisted us with setting up the benchmark for the three areas of focus that I mentioned earlier. The Alliance has many local, state, and national partners in attendance, such as American Cancer Society, American Heart Association, American Lung Association, TSET, American Non-Smokers Right, Guiding Right Incorporation, the Oklahoma Hospital Association, ODMH, our Mental Health Department, OSDH, just to name a few. And these partners have been crucial in helping us set up those benchmarks in the state plan.

J. Tyree: So ultimately, Elizabeth, what do OSDH and its partners hope to accomplish with this plan?

Chery-Mullen: (1:56) The end goal of the state plan is to decrease the tobacco burden and disparities in Oklahoma, which will lead to a decrease in chronic disease morbidity and mortality, and of course, reduce of our healthcare costs. This plan includes evidence-based and population-based approaches to implement a comprehensive tobacco control program. The plan should serve as a roadmap to prevent you from using tobacco product. It should protect Oklahomans from secondhand smoke and e-cigarette also, and of course, increase cessation in our state.

(2:32) The state plan also highlights critical activities that will guide the state tobacco prevention and control work and build on the evaluation of the target outcome of the previous five-year state plan. That state plan aims to guide our work in tobacco control prevention and cessation.

J. Tyree: Just about everyone knows tobacco use is detrimental, but how much does it *really* cost us Oklahomans?

Chery-Mullen: (3:31) So tobacco use costs us a lot of money in Oklahoma. Annually, Oklahoma spends 1.62 billion in total medical costs. Those costs are associated directly with tobacco use. 264 million of that cost is paid by Medicaid. We also lose 2.1 billion in loss of productivity from premature death. Tobacco also costs every Oklahoman household about a little bit over \$1,000 yearly, whether or not they use tobacco product or not. So not only is tobacco costing us our health and our lives, it's also causing us financial issues, as well.

J. Tyree: And let us never lose focus of the about 7,500 Oklahomans who lose their lives each year, in addition to those who succumb to secondhand smoke and other forms of tobacco use. So your work at OSDH is very important. Can you tell us more about your program and what you try to accomplish?

Chery-Mullen: (8:12) The Oklahoma Tobacco Control Program is housed at the State Department of Health and the National and State Tobacco Control program, a program of the CDC funds us. Our program focuses on a comprehensive approach to helping prevent young people from ever starting to use tobacco products, protecting Oklahomans from secondhand smoke and e-cigarette aerosol and increasing cessation while working to close the gap in disparities related to tobacco use.

On a side note, Oklahoma is one of the few states without a comprehensive clean indoor air law that protects people from being exposed to second-hand smoke and e-cigarette aerosol. Also, the state of Oklahoma is super preempted, which means that a local jurisdiction cannot pass a policy that is stronger than state law regarding clean indoor air, restricting flavored tobacco product and zoning, which would help with reduce access to tobacco product. So going back, our program focused on four strategies. We focus on state and community intervention, mass reach health communication intervention, and then of course tobacco use dependence treatment intervention, and surveillance and evaluation.

J. Tyree: Health communication – you are speaking our language!

Chery-Mullen: (9:35) Fortunately for us in Oklahoma, TSET take care of almost all of our mass health communication intervention needs. So that is something that we do not have to worry about. In terms of the staffing, we are a staff of about six people. So there is myself, I am the manager, and my role is to oversee the implementation of the state plan in the day-to-day activity of our program. And then we have one coordinator that leads cessation efforts. We have a coordinator that leads youth prevention. We have another coordinator that leads the protection efforts. And then we have two consultants that work on the day-to-day activities to help facilitate implementation of our strategies and activities for our program. In our program, as I stated earlier, we are housed at the state health department within the chronic disease department. And a lot of our work is aimed at reducing chronic disease associated with tobacco use. And that includes looking at health, the health disparities that are caused by tobacco use.

J. Tyree: Are there any parts of the state tobacco reduction plan that are already bearing fruit?

Chery-Mullen: (11:18) Great question. There has been a decline in adult cigarette smoking from 19.1% in 2020 to 16.9% in 2021, which reflects the efforts of partners such as TSET or SDH or DMH and many others to decrease the smoking weight of tobacco. And this is a really huge deal considering where we were five years ago in terms of tobacco use. We also have a website called Validate that trains clerk about ways to read ID card and not sell tobacco product to underage buyers, meaning people under 21. So that effort is directly aimed at youth prevention. So there are a lot of different things that are happening right now in Oklahoma that are helping to decrease tobacco use. For example, one of the programs that TSET is doing with youth, they are helping with retail education visits where they are going and at a retailer and helping educate them about the right thing to do by not selling tobacco product to an underage buyer.

(12:43) And by doing that, it's helping curb our youth initiation rate of tobacco, of a tobacco product.

J. Tyree: What else is happening that is lowering tobacco and vape use in our state?

Chery-Mullen: (12:53-ish) Other things that are happening right now as well are those lovely voluntary tobacco free policies that different communities can pass. As a state, as I mentioned earlier, we are preempted. And one of the ways that we can be better at protecting

people from secondhand smoke and being exposed to e-cigs aerosol all is by passing voluntary tobacco free policies that are comprehensive in nature, that are gold standard. And then a lot of jurisdiction are also passing tobacco free policies. And those policies cannot be stronger than state law because we're talking about jurisdiction, but they were passing those to protect their people. And another thing that I know that's being done is multi-unit housing policies.

(13:54) So a lot of multi-unit housing are taking a stand to make sure that their residents are healthier. And the way that they do that is by having a tobacco free policy or a smoke-free policy. Most of the time it will be a smoke-free policy to be able to protect their residents from being exposed to secondhand smoke. So a lot of things are being done right now.

J. Tyree: Conversely, in what areas do we still have much work to do?

Chery-Mullen: (14:33) So I talk about preemption earlier. To me, any policy to repeal preemption to allow localities the ability to decide about their tobacco related policy needs could prove useful to improve health outcomes in Oklahoma. Having policies at the state level that allows local jurisdiction to pass flavor ban on tobacco products could help decrease youth initiation of a tobacco product. Bear in mind that flavorful products are often ways that gets youth to use a tobacco product because the taste is mass the harshness of tobacco products. So it makes it easier for a youth to start using a tobacco product. Also, having the ability to have things like zoning ordinance that restrict the location of a tobacco retailer at least a thousand feet from a school or a playground, could prove helpful as well because it would create the opportunity for a retailer to not be too close to places where kids congregate and making it easier for kids to have access. So those things could limit kids access. And I say kids, I'm talking about people under 21. It would limit their access to a tobacco product.

J. Tyree: So what can just regular folks do to help someone quit tobacco, or to protect their community?

Chery-Mullen: (17:55) You do not have to be a tobacco state manager. You don't have to be a doctor. You don't have to be a nurse to do something about tobacco. You don't have to be a teacher. The best thing that you can do, for example, if you see someone that's struggling with tobacco use and they're ready, you feel like they're ready to quit, connect them to the helpline. There are different things that you can do. Be more involved in your community or your jurisdiction policies. So if your jurisdiction doesn't have a tobacco free policy, be part of the community trying to figure out what needs to be done so you can protect your community. There are so many things that you can do if you are a school principal. There is a good chance that you have youth in your school that are vaping. And so the one thing that you can do connect, you can be that connector between them and My Life, My Quit, which is a program aim to help with use increase, I should say, to help increase cessation for youth. There's just so many things that you can do. You just have to be willing and you have to have an open mind and an open eyes to see what's happening in your community.

[Music]

D. Jasna: It is worth noting for our listeners just where they can find and read the state tobacco use reduction plan. The easiest way is visit Google or your favorite search engine and type Oklahoma State Tobacco Plan. The first link should say "State Tobacco Plan" on Oklahoma.gov. That link will take you to an OSDH page with links to state tobacco plans. Click on the most recent plan link, which will say "2022 State Tobacco Plan," and you are there.

The plan is the result of a lot of work and collaboration within our state, whereas the corrective statements that soon will appear in stores throughout the nation, including here in Oklahoma. Chase Harvick, the TSET health communication manager who oversees our tobacco-related messaging, recently had a conversation about those statements with James. Chase delved into what the corrective statements are, how they came about, and when we can expect to see them in stores. Let's listen ...

J. Tyree: **(0:17)** Well, thank you for joining us today. I appreciate it. So of course, tobacco corrective statements are coming to Oklahoma and really to all states, but what exactly are they and where and when will we see them?

C. Harvick: **(0:33)** That's a great question, James. And as you know, this goes way, way back, all the way back to 2006 when US District Court Judge Gladys Kessler found tobacco companies were guilty of breaking civil racketeering laws, and they engaged in ongoing fraud and lied to the public about the dangers of smoking and tobacco in general. So they have been a part of that agreement. That decision was they have to post corrective statements on their websites, in newspapers, on television, and in retail environments.

(1:08) Now, I know you're thinking 2006, that's a lifetime ago. They have fought tooth and nail against every aspect of these requirements in courts, and now we are just getting to the last prong of those corrective statements, and that's the point of sale. You might have seen some newspaper and TV ads that had corrective statements in 2017. The cigarette packs, they added the corrective statements on the packs in 2018, and also the websites in 2018. But right now, we are in what's called the ramp up period of the point of sale corrective statements when tobacco companies are modifying their contracts with tobacco retailers to include requirements about these corrective statements. Now, starting July 1st, they are going to begin installing the initial round of signage that have the statements.

J. Tyree: **(2:06)** Now let me ask you this ... what is a corrective statement?

C. Harvick: **(2:10)** Absolutely. Corrective statements and examples include smoking kills on average 1,200 Americans a day. Another one says that cigarette companies intentionally designed cigarettes with enough nicotine to create and sustain addiction. Another says, when you smoke, the nicotine actually changes the brain. That's why quitting is so hard. There are several others that you'll see, but those are just a few examples. So what they're trying to do is they're trying to correct the misinformation that tobacco companies distributed for generations.

- J. Tyree: (3:29) So where and when will we see these?
- C. Harvick: (3:33) You're going to start seeing a few popup after July 1st, and that's the posting period. So you'll see the initial rounds of signage installed in, but then, beginning October 1st, the signs must be displayed and they will be ... The first round will run through June 30th, 2025, and then they will have to rotate in new signage by July 1st, 2024. And then that will continue through June 30th, 2025. I'm sorry, I said that wrong. But yeah, so starting October 1st and running through June. I'm going to say that one more time. The implementation period for the point-of-sale corrective signage is October 1st through June 30th of 2025.
- J. Tyree: (4:16) You mentioned point of sale. So does this mean that they will be in grocery stores or convenience stores or things, places like that?
- C. Harvick: (4:26) Most retailers that have contracts with tobacco distributors will be impacted by this. And nearly 200,000 tobacco retailers across the country must display these signs with corrective statements. ... (4:53) And this is such a long-awaited result of this unprecedented landmark ruling from the Department of Justice.
- J. Tyree: (5:38) You mentioned that tobacco industries sneaky marketing practices. And I wanted to ask you just who do they target and do you have a couple of examples?
- C. Harvick: (6:02) Yeah. We know that smoking kills 7,500 Oklahoma adults each year, and we know that one in five Oklahoma kids is exposed to secondhand smoke at home. 19,000 kids under 18 try cigarettes for the first time each year in Oklahoma. And that's from the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids. It costs \$1.9 billion in annual healthcare costs for our state. That's just our state alone. And we know that a majority of Oklahomans support these stronger policies and believe the state lawmakers should maintain a healthy distance from lobbyists. And that's not happening right now.
- J. Tyree: (6:41) You mentioned kids who are starting each year, like 19,000, you said. So are kids, young ones some of the ones that they're targeting in terms of their marketing?
- C. Harvick: (6:53) Absolutely. You see it at the events that they sponsor. In Oklahoma, they do a lot of rodeo events, marketing smokeless to males. It's hard to ... It's inescapable.
- (7:25) But the good news is by implementing effective control and prevention policies, we can save the next generation of Oklahomans from these same patterns, from the deception, from the death, from the illness. It is possible, and you look at the numbers and it is working.
- J. Tyree: (7:43) It seems like it is working. (8:04) What can people do in response to the corrective statements? They go to the store. They go to the retailer. They see what tobacco can really do. So when people see this or any of our ads or any information, what can people do in response to this?
- C. Harvick: (11:48) Get involved. If you're ready to make a positive change in your community, please take a stand. Help clear the air for future generations. Become a social influencer

on your social media platform of choice. Post about the necessary policy changes and encourage your friends and family to join the fight.

~~Ask for change. Contact your legislature, I'm sorry, your legislator.~~ Ask for change. Contact your elected officials, your local TSET grantee or prominent local leaders, and discuss health improvement opportunities in your community. And finally, stay up to date with us. We have a monthly e-newsletter from Tobacco Stops With Me. You can sign up online at stopswithme.com. But James, the most important thing I want people to know that they can take away from our discussion today is that when we work together, we can inspire change across Oklahoma. And I think corrective statements is another step in the long, long, long progress toward a tobacco-free Oklahoma.

[Music]

J. Tyree: I've got to say, Dylan, you brands managers here at TSET know your stuff!

D. Jasna: Ha thanks, but so do a lot of people who work hard every day to improve the health of Oklahomans and the environments in which we live, work and play. This includes people like Elizabeth Chery-Mullen and her colleagues at the Oklahoma State Department of Health, and the local champions that Chase mentioned in his closing comments who inspire change toward a more tobacco-free Oklahoma.

I want to repeat Chase's invitation to visit the Tobacco Stops With Me website at [**stopswithme.com**](http://stopswithme.com) to learn more about the extent of tobacco's influence and toll on Oklahomans, and how we, together, can slow it down or even stop it in our communities and state. And if you or anyone you know is thinking of quitting tobacco, to visit [**okhelpline.com**](http://okhelpline.com) to get the free assistance that can help make it happen.

You know, James, it's amazing how much money one can save and how much better your feel after quitting tobacco or vaping.

J. Tyree: Or better yet, never starting in the first place.

D. Jasna: Very true. We want to thank our guests for this episode of the TSET Better Health Podcast, Elizabeth Chery-Mullen and Chase Harvick. And we always appreciate you, our listeners to this and other episodes of the TSET Better Health Podcast. You can find any episode by visiting [**Oklahoma.gov/tset/podcast**](http://Oklahoma.gov/tset/podcast) or your favorite podcast platform. So until next time, this is Dylan Jasna ...

J. Tyree: And James Tyree, wishing you peace

D. Jasna: And better health.