

TSET Better Health Podcast Transcript

Episode 41: TSET Reorganization and Local Nutrition Innovations

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Summary: TSET has reorganized departments within its agency, and Executive Director Julie Bisbee provides details on the restructure and how it will help TSET better serve Oklahomans. Episode 41 also looks at local innovations that are helping more Oklahomans enjoy access to healthy foods, including a produce store that gardener and farmers market champion Loretta Merritt opened recently within a shipping container in rural Cherokee County.

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[Theme music]

James Tyree: Hello, happy summer to you, and welcome to Episode 41 of the TSET Better Health Podcast. This is your host James Tyree, and, alas dear listeners, we are no longer joined by Dylan Jasna, TSET health communication manager.

Dylan Jasna: Haha James, though technically you are correct. I am still your podcast co-host Dylan Jasna, but my new title at TSET is associate director of campaigns and brands. And our department's name changed this month from Health Communication to Strategic Communication. It's just one part of an agency restructure here at TSET that we will hear more about our executive director, Julie Bisbee, in this episode.

J. Tyree: We had a really good conversation about what is happening at TSET and why, and, more importantly to you, our listeners, how the staff and department reorganization will help the agency better serve the people and communities here in Oklahoma going forward. But this episode is not just about what's happening within TSET office ...

D. Jasna: No, because today we also will head out to rural Cherokee County in northeast Oklahoma, where we meet and hear from an innovative woman who recently opened a produce store within shipping container, just so people for miles around will have access to the freshest fruits and vegetables imaginable, because it's all local.

J. Tyree: Her name is Loretta Merritt, and she's also heavily involved with the Tahlequah Farmers Market and works with TSET Healthy Living Program staff in Cherokee County on that and other nutrition initiatives. We will hear from Loretta and Lora Buechele, program coordinator of the TSET HLP in Cherokee County, later in this episode.

D. Jasna: Looking forward to it. But for now, James, let's listen to your conversation with TSET Executive Director Julie Bisbee on the "what, why, when and how" about the agency's staff reorganization.

J. Tyree: [\(00:01\)](#): ~~All right.~~ We are here with Executive Director Julie Bisbee. It is so nice of you to be with us today.

Julie Bisbee: [\(00:09\)](#): Thanks for having me.

J. Tyree: [\(00:10\)](#): I remember when the podcast first started and we had a little opening video to announce it three and a half years ago. And it's amazing how much the podcast has grown, but so has TSET as well. Which is why you're here, to talk about the growth and how we're addressing that.

J. Bisbee: [\(00:28\)](#): Absolutely, absolutely. The podcast is ... again, like a lot of things that we do at TSET. We knew we had a story to tell. We knew we had a message to get out in a different format. And it's been such an exciting journey to see how that has evolved and how the public and how our audience has received it. It's amazing. ~~So happy podcast anniversary.~~

J. Tyree: [\(00:55\)](#): Thank you very much. Well, let me start with this, Julie. TSET has saved a lot of lives and a lot of money for Oklahomans over the past 20 plus years through its grants and its programs, really sticking to its mission. So with this success that we've had, why have you seen a need to restructure the organization? Why mess up a good thing?

J. Bisbee: [\(01:20\)](#): ~~Yeah. Yeah, a great question.~~ You're right. We've seen a lot of amazing accomplishments. And really, ~~TSET's existence~~, when you look at what other states did with their money from big tobacco, I mean, it is really something our state should be proud of. In terms of accomplishments, adult smoking is at an all time low. We have a variety of grants now rolling out to engage with partners of different sizes, abilities, sectors. We're seeing the fruits of our efforts pay off in increased community support for health. And our promise to the people of the state continues to be to reduce the toll of tobacco and work to improve health outcomes.

[\(02:01\)](#): So when you think about the evolution of an organization, we've been around a little more than 20 years, and we had a great foundation. I think those early founders, those early board members really had a vision. And we've tried to stay true to that, but also look at ways that we can innovate, that we can read the field, and better meet the needs of Oklahomans. So we have a commitment to innovation. I personally believe that we are charged to bring the best services, the best programs to the people of the state. They voted for us, they affirmed us, and that's really important to me that we continue to look at our work and see how we can have continuous improvement in what we're doing.

[\(02:52\)](#): So that's one of the things that drove our look at our organizational structure. Where we have resources, people, how are they spending their time and things like that. And really, the changes that we're making with our organization are really meant to allow us to better serve the people of the state. Allow us to leverage partnerships, to look for increased collaboration, whether that's internal or with other grants, other

portfolios. And in the same way that TSET's changes support metrics and goals, our goal was also to create pathways for positive growth for our employees.

(03:31): For me, leadership is about clearing barriers away to help people thrive, grow, and a bit of challenging them to get outside of their current view and take those risks for a really big payoff. And so a lot of this changing internally is about meeting the needs of the future, but also looking at ways that we can better serve our existing grantees, future grantees, and the overall goals to improve health for the state.

J. Tyree: (04:03): All right. That shines a pretty good light on why this restructure is taking place, really positioning the agency to go forward for our state. ~~So that makes a lot of sense.~~ So what is the new setup? How is it now restructured? When does it take effect? We know the why, now tell us about the what.

J. Bisbee: (04:26): ~~Sure, yeah.~~ Reorganizations usually happen in two ways. You take a look and you either are deciding to fix things that were going poorly or you're looking for ways to meet the needs of the future. And we are fortunate to be in a position that we're looking for ways to better meet the needs of the future.

(04:45): So we've organized our staff around a few key pillars. Our transition to the new organization started July 1. We're just a few weeks in, so of course, there's lots of bugs and things to work out. But I'm really proud of the way that our teams are coming forward, coalescing around the goals and bringing solutions to the table. ~~I mean, I think as we're learning and growing, all of us, we have to be willing to look back and ...~~ continuous improvement. Again, it's like, "That went well. How can we make it exceptional?"

(05:23): So to your point, how is the agency structure a little bit different? We are going to have an office of program architecture. We're moving some of our senior staff who have been around, really since the early years of TSET, to a place where they will be looking long-term, where are the gaps? Where are there opportunities for rapid health improvement or different types of programs? And so we have new ... a Program Architecture Department.

(05:54): And then for our existing grantees and partnerships, we have Engagement and Impact. And this will be looking at ways, again, to increase that collaboration between our different types of grants. Leveraging so that we can get to those goals of improving health, reducing tobacco use, increasing the numbers of smoke-free policies, things like that. We have amazing grantees. We have committed, passionate people working towards these goals across the state. What kind of synergy can we be building within that group? And so that's one of the things they'll focus on.

(06:30): Another thing that we've added, more intentionally, is a Capacity Building Division. Recognizing that TSET has always been committed to meeting organizations where they are and helping them improve, if that is their desire. And leading that local change . But we've made an intentional decision to put staff to think about, where are

there opportunities to help organizations grow, be stronger? Where are there opportunities to look across the state to see where we're not and where we should be? And how do we get into communities or organizations and come alongside them and say, "Let's work on this together." And so that's something that is going to be rolling out as we get our feet under us ... new, and really putting resources to it.

J. Tyree: [\(07:25\)](#): That's pretty exciting.

J. Bisbee: [\(07:27\)](#): It is very exciting. It is very exciting. Our teams, especially our program managers, I mean, they're always looking for ways to make connections in their communities or connections across systems to support tobacco-free or improved health policies. And this is really a nod to that, that this is not an also-ran portion of your job. This is something that we need to be doing for the state.

J. Tyree: [\(07:51\)](#): The nice thing about that, Julie, is thinking about this restructure and how it affects us as an agency. But it sounds like ~~we're really~~... part of this is to help organizations throughout the state. Help them also move forward and to improve and to make the most of themselves as well.

J. Bisbee: [\(08:10\)](#): Absolutely. And we know that we are not going to change health across the state from our offices in Oklahoma City. We need local partners. We need businesses, we need universities, all of them to come to the table and take up a link of that rope and help move our state forward. So we're hoping to really see some big strides out of that.

[\(08:40\)](#): And then one other change, structurally that folks will see, is we now have a Strategic Communication Division. That unifies our Communication and Marketing Division under one. So we'll continue to have our award-winning campaigns, Tobacco Stops With Me, Shape Your Future, and of course, the promotion of the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline. But we're also going to have a branch of our Communication Division that is focused on telling the rich stories of Oklahomans who are making healthy changes. Bringing folks together around that to help their friends and neighbors live healthier lives.

[\(09:19\)](#): And there are amazing things happening across the state. There are amazing things happening in our health systems or our state agency partners, and we think all Oklahomans ought to know that. They need to know the good things that are happening. And so we're putting some intentional resources for that storytelling. Kind of along the lines of what you're already doing with the podcast, but really saying, "This is something that we need to be doing more of. We need to be thinking about it." And so folks externally should expect to see more awesome stories coming out of TSET of their organizations coming together for this.

J. Tyree: [\(09:58\)](#): That certainly is near and dear to my heart, Julie.

J. Bisbee: [\(10:00\)](#): Yes, absolutely. And then on our administrative side, we are adding a Quality and Performance Division. We always have external evaluation of our programs. Quality Performance, in their work, is going to be focusing on the impact. Are our programs working as intended? Are there outliers that need to be addressed, either with what we're putting out to the grantees or in our programs, or even internally?

[\(10:32\)](#): It is really about looking at accountability and transparency and saying, "Are we doing what we said we were going to do? And how's it going? And are there opportunities for improvement, and what would it take to get there?" And so that's part of us maturing into that next level, and it's very exciting.

J. Tyree: [\(10:51\)](#): Yeah, that's very important too. We're continuing to hold ourselves accountable for the work we do for the State of Oklahoma. And this department should help us along the way, so that's great.

J. Bisbee: [\(11:02\)](#): Absolutely.

J. Tyree: [\(11:04\)](#): Well, are there any additional changes that you see in the foreseeable future? And if so, what are they?

J. Bisbee: [\(11:12\)](#): ~~Yeah. So as we are aligning our talent ... I'm going to start that over. I just spit all over that one. Okay. Question, question, question.~~ Yes. As we're aligning our talent, we're also in the process of updating our three-year strategic plan with our appointed TSET board of directors. So your listeners should expect to see this fall, some of the fruits of that labor. Again, we have spent quite a bit of time of looking at our metrics, our programs, and really scoping out what we need to be focusing on for the next three years. So that will drive some change and some focus.

[\(11:54\)](#): Our listeners should also expect to see additional funding opportunities this year. We currently have a Built Environment funding opportunity opened through September 1st, that is looking for proposals that might help in the planning or policy development at the local level, or even construction. Our organization's interested in changing their streets, sidewalks, or parks in ways that would support physical activity, increased transportation to vital services, things like that. And so we are continuing that.

[\(12:30\)](#): We also anticipate having our Discovery Grants open again, which has brought us a lot of different partners, to include how can we help more people participate in senior games? How can we help our low-vision population, make sure that they have opportunities for safe physical activity? And so you should expect to see that coming out as well. And as we move forward with the implementation of our strategic plan over the next three years, I think folks will see us being very thoughtful about our funding opportunities, our RFPs. And those will continue to evolve because we want to meet the needs, we want to understand what is happening in our state, but we also want to move best practice forward.

J. Tyree: ([13:22](#)): When you describe those grants, it's amazing how they affect so many of us in our local communities, and a wide variety of different people in terms of pedestrians, bicyclists, different populations. ~~And it seems like you put them all together, and this could really benefit a lot of folks. So that's pretty exciting, Julie.~~

J. Tyree: ([13:46](#)): So how, if at all, will these internal changes that you spoke of affect the agency's ability, continued ability for grant making in these various programs? You touched on this already but tell us a little bit more about that.

J. Bisbee: ([14:04](#)): Yeah. Great question. Our goal is to continue to look for ways to improve our processes without losing the things that are working for our grantees, partners, and getting outcomes for the state. So over the next few years, I think you could expect to see our funding opportunities demonstrate that. If we have a planning group that is saying where are we not? Or what populations continue to struggle with tobacco use or what communities have low access to physical activity or food? I mean, we want to have grants, pilots, things that are going to address that, and also shine a light on possible solutions that maybe we haven't done in our state before.

([14:50](#)): And so you can also expect to see us digging into the data. We want to look for ways to engage other organizations in efforts to prevent and reduce tobacco use, obesity, and we are going to put resources to that.

J. Tyree: ([15:04](#)): ~~Okay. I've really enjoyed this conversation so far, and this information about the exciting things that are happening here within our office at TSET. And how that can be made manifest throughout the state in our local communities and agencies and organizations, how they'll be bolstered by all this.~~

([15:23](#)): There's a lot to be excited about for a lot of people, but my final question for you is this. What excites you, personally, about what's happening here at the agency?

J. Bisbee: ([15:34](#)): Oh, wow. Well, I started at TSET as the agency's first public information officer more than a decade ago. And I think what is most exciting to me is that our agency, our board of directors, I mean, we have the ability to innovate, and it's a value to us. And we are able to move that to action. I feel very lucky to have worked with previous leaders, founding board members, to understand their vision.

([16:11](#)): And I think we're taking that to the next level. We're planning for what that next 20 years needs to look like, and we're making sure that our internal operations are supporting the goals and the objectives. And so building to the future, honoring the past, and investing in our organization, having the ability to do all of that is exciting and amazing. And I'm just really thrilled to see what's going to come next.

[Music]

D. Jasna: That was a good conversation that lets our listeners know about changes that are underway at TSET and why they are happening. Between new grants rolling out, stronger partnerships with current grantees, and the innovative storytelling and

messaging campaigns that will come out of Strategic Communication, we really will be in position to improve the lives of Oklahomans in more and better ways than ever. But finding new ways to help us all achieve better health is not just happening within our office, it's also taking place throughout the state, especially with our grantees and their community partners.

- J. Tyree: Just one example of this is in rural northeast Oklahoma, where a new produce store within a shipping container just opened. The TSET Healthy Living Program lead coordinator in Cherokee County emailed me a couple of weeks ago to tell me about the store and the person who opened it, saying she could really be great for the podcast. And you know what, Dylan, she was right!
- D. Jasna: Well, without further ado, let's meet them and also hear how they met each other.
- L. Merritt: **(0:00 Loretta)** I'm Loretta Merritt and I am the owner and operator of Shortline Produce Company and I am also a vendor at the Tahlequah Farmer's Market, the Lolly House farmer's market, and I run a mobile market of my own through my farm business, Shortline Farms.
- L. Buechele: **(0:45 Lora)** This is Lora Buechele with the TSET Healthy Living Program, serving Cherokee County, Program Coordinator.
- (0:53)** ~~Yeah,~~ So I met Loretta a few years ago just as a TSET Healthy Living Program grantee and being an advocate for our local farmers market. But more recently, we attended a Rural Mobile Market 101 class together representing the Tahlequah Farmers Market and our agency here at Cherokee County Health Services Council, as a project to run and operate a mobile market here in Cherokee County. And Loretta and I were able to really form a great partnership through that process. And so we've just continued to stay connected, and she's a board member of Tahlequah Farmers Market now, and so we've just really have worked together on food access over the past few years.
- D. Jasna: That's good. So Loretta, tell us about your farming background.
- L. Merritt: **(1:05)** I've been farming commercially on a small scale since 2012, and I go back before that as a home gardener. In 2006, I helped to found the Tahlequah Farmer's Market and had a small presence there as a vendor and continued to grow more and more produce all the time. We went to a you-pick garden of a decent size in 2012 and we ran that through 2019 when we went back to the farmer's market as full-time produce vendors, and we have a farm stand and we've just opened up our produce stand on the highway south of Keys, Oklahoma.
- D. Jasna: And gardening?
- L. Merritt: **(2:11)** Well, I've been a home gardener since I was basically a child. My grandfather was a market gardener and I helped him on his gardens in Denver, Colorado, and I've always grown food for my own family and my own use. Then when I retired from full-time work is when I switched over to begin selling my produce to other people.

- D. Jasna: And now you have Shortline Produce. What is that?
- L. Merritt: (2:37) Shortline Produce Company is a specialty market. It operates as a multi-farm CSA and we are partnering with local producers to bring their food stuffs to the people of Cherokee County that wouldn't necessarily have access to it otherwise. We are set up in an area that is 20 miles in any direction from any groceries at all besides convenience store type foods. It is on the arterial that goes to town. It is convenient to the rural people there and it's just dedicated to creating affordable access for people that don't have it otherwise.
- D. Jasna: Lora, what did you think when you first heard of this idea?
- L. Buechele: (3:41) It is just so beautiful to see something like this in our community. When Loretta came to me back in March and she said ~~... Was it March? It's been a while, but when Loretta came to me, she had said,~~ "Hey, I have this idea. How can TSET support this?" I was like, "Oh my goodness, this is such a great idea." And one of the first things I was able to do is connect Loretta to our local vo-tech here and their heavy equipment program to support cleaning off the property, because that was a major milestone in getting started with even being able to bring the shipping container in. So I mean, in terms of access to healthy food, you're talking about this community, this unincorporated community, that had a grocery store, and a few years ago, the grocery store could not survive. And so these community members had nowhere to go except to in town where two of the three grocery stores are right next to each other.
- D. Jasna: It sounds like the store is very out of the way. But where, exactly, is it?
- L. Merritt: (5:01) Well, the post office route is a Park Hill route, so the zip code is actually a Park Hill zip code, but it is south of Keys on Highway 82 in between Big Hollow roads and Carter Landing Road, which makes it about two and a half miles south of the Indian Road intersection at Keys. Yes, it's absolutely rural. I believe that it's vitally important because it's their only access unless they grow their own or drive a 40-mile round trip to get fresh food. I believe how our hours are set up, we have evening hours and extended weekend hours so that people can shop when it's convenient on their way home from town. They can get the items they need for the weekend and not have to make another trip to town
- D. Jasna: What a valuable resource for people in that area. But how did you get the idea of placing a fruits and veggies store inside a railcar-like *shipping container*?
- L. Merritt: (6:34) I learned about that idea from a summit I attended. It was a local agricultural summit that I attended in Broken Arrow and there was an idea that was being presented, making little grocery stores from shipping cargo containers, and they were using two and three cargo containers linked together to make a full-blown grocery store. I thought about how I could modify that idea to be much more affordable and be a much more efficient design than what that was. I came across some photographs of the exact same thing I was designing in my head in use in the Caribbean and I thought that would be perfect, so I took my time, I located that type of cargo container that opens all along the sides and I ordered one. It took a long time to actually locate one and get it here. It

took about four months, but it's arrived. We've got it set up and it is absolutely perfect for what we're doing.

D. Jasna: How wonderful. Now long before you opened the store, you have been heavily involved with farmers markets. Why is that?

L. Merritt: (10:02) I think that the farmer's markets are critically important for our local growers because it's one of the few venues that they have where they have a certain customer base that they know is going to arrive, is going to have money to spend. One thing that our farmers' market in Tahlequah has done an extremely good job doing is promoting SNAP and the senior market benefits programs and the Cherokee Nation WIC programs. Those dollars benefit not only our growers, they benefit our buyers also. We have a double up Oklahoma program where SNAP dollars are doubled up to \$20 a visit and all that money, it brings food into homes and it brings money into the growers' pockets. That's pretty important for our little community.

L. Buechele: (12:35) ~~Loretta, you touched on a lot of the same points that I had. But I think there's this misconception. I'm going to restart that so that it sounds better.~~ I think that there's this misconception about farmers markets not being affordable, that maybe farmers market are for more affluent neighborhoods. However, like Loretta said, a lot of markets around the state of Oklahoma except SNAP benefits, previously known as food stamps. They accept Double Up Oklahoma, which gives the consumer double their money every market day. So not just, if you spend \$20 this month or this weekend, it's \$20 total. You could spend up to \$20 every weekend of the summer and double that money in your SNAP benefits on fresh, quality produce. It's amazing. I love Double Up Oklahoma. It's such a great program.

(15:38) And then recently, Cherokee Nation has partnered with a lot of farmers markets across the tribal jurisdiction, with Tahlequah Farmers Market being one of those locations. And now we have tribal citizens on the Women's, Infant and Children program that can go and get fresh produce from the farmers market via vouchers. So the affordability aspect is so, so important, but also connecting our community to where their food comes from. ~~There are so many young children that do not have gardens at home, who don't really understand that the food comes from the source in the ground, that it starts as a seed and it's built from the ground and grows, and gardening is such a beautiful process.~~ And to be able to go to a farmers market and meet the people who actually grow your food, it's just, it's amazing. And I think it plays into our health disparities that we see within our community, having a higher fruit and vegetable intake means better health outcomes. So farmers markets are critical to communities, especially in rural communities that do not have access to a grocery store nearby.

D. Jasna: That's a great point, Lora.

L. Buechele: ~~Yeah, James,~~ (19:02) Can we put a shameless plug in there about Shape Your Future on how to find farmers markets?

D. Jasna: By all means; take it away!

L. Buechele: Anybody who's looking for a local farmers market near you, you can visit shapeyourfutureok.com to find a market near you, farmers market shopping tips, some fun scavenger hunts for kids, and just healthy recipes on how to make that eggplant or cook your zucchini and squash in a healthy way.

D. Jasna: Well said and much appreciated. In fact, we very much appreciate you and Loretta for joining us today, and we wish you well in your ongoing efforts to bring healthy foods to people in your communities.

[Music]

D. Jasna: Loretta's new store is one terrific example of innovative ideas throughout the state that have increased access to healthy foods.

J. Tyree: In an earlier podcast episode, we visited a wonderful grocery store that opened in northeast Oklahoma City, which had long been a food desert, and I have met with small gas station and convenience store owners who worked with TSET Healthy Living Program grantees to bring manageable numbers of popular fruits to offer their customers. If you would like to share a story of how a TSET grant or program has benefited your community, please let me know at jtyree@tset.ok.gov. Our new Integrated Communication team may be able to highlight it in a future podcast episode or by another means.

D. Jasna: And remember, you can catch any past episodes of the podcast by visiting Oklahoma.gov/tset/podcast and listen to any episode on that webpage or anywhere you normally listen to podcasts. Thank you for joining us today, and we thank our guests Julie Bisbee, Loretta Merritt and Lora Buechele. So until next time, this is Dylan Jasna ...

J. Tyree: And James Tyree wishing you peace ...

D. Jasna: And better health.