

## TSET Better Health Podcast Transcript

### Episode 55: TSET: Improving Health in Oklahoma for 25 Years

Nov. 25, 2025

Summary: The Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust was created by a statewide vote 25 years ago this month to reduce cardiovascular disease, cancer and other diseases often caused by tobacco use and obesity. In Episode 55 of the TSET Better Health Podcast, TSET Executive Director Julie Bisbee and longtime family physician Dr. Steven Crawford discuss, from their perspectives, the many impacts TSET has made on gradually improving health indicators in Oklahoma. Melissa Cunningham offers a local view of TSET impacts as she shares how wellness discussions and implementations in Delaware County have gone from "crickets to transformation" in less than 10 years.

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#### [Theme music]

James Tyree: Hello everyone, I hope you are having a great day. Welcome to Episode 55 of the TSET Better Health Podcast. I am your host, James Tyree, associate director of Integrated Communications at TSET ...

Sarah Carson: And I am Sarah Carson, campaign manager for TSET. We wish happy, healthy and safe holidays to all our listeners and a happy silver anniversary to TSET, which was created 25 years ago this month by a statewide vote on Nov. 7, 2000.

J. Tyree: Sarah, there is no doubt that as campaign manager, you have been *plenty* busy this year. You were heavily involved with 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary events that started with the April 1<sup>st</sup> release a book about the creation of TSET and the fight against commercial tobacco in Oklahoma that both preceded it and continues to this day. The book is available in public libraries throughout the state, and for online access to information on the past, present and future of TSET, you're invited to visit <https://ok.tset25.com>.

S. Carson: You may want to visit your local library or [ok.tset25.com](https://ok.tset25.com) *after* listening to this special episode. You don't want to miss hearing from our guests and their unique perspectives on how TSET partners with local communities and statewide organizations to improve health. They'll also touch on new funding opportunities to keep that momentum going toward a healthier Oklahoma.

J. Tyree: Our listeners will meet a Delaware County resident who shared how TSET wellness programs and local buy-in have transformed parks and other public spaces into healthier and more inviting places in her rural northeast Oklahoma community. We'll also hear from a longtime family physician and retired professor at OU Health Sciences Center, who spoke on TSET's roles in expanding access to health care in underserved areas and lowering tobacco use in our state.

S. Carson: But we will start this 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary episode with a conversation with the top person at TSET.

Julie Bisbee: I'm Julie Bisbee. I'm the Executive Director of TSET.

S. Carson: Julie, many things may come to mind when thinking about TSET's first 25 years. But with your journalism background, how would you write a strong, punchy lead that can summarize the TSET story in 30 words or less?

J. Bisbee: Well, I would do it thinking of a headline, so Voter-Created Endowment for Health Pays Off: Model for the Nation.

S. Carson: That's a good summary. You and co-authors Bob Burke and Marshall Snipes wrote much more than just a good lead or headline in a book that was released this year about the history of TSET and the state's fight against big tobacco. Can you tell us more about what's in the book and why exactly it was written?

J. Bisbee: Yeah, so it was really an opportunity to go back and think about what has been our state's history with tobacco, and also public health. I think that was an exciting opportunity to look at the history because there's much more to it than just the creation of TSET. It was also really important to us in writing the book that we were capturing TSET's story. It's something that all Oklahomans should be proud of. It's relatively new in the history of the state, but it is a model for the nation. We wanted to capture what were people thinking, what were the events that led up to this that helped formulate the plan for a state question to create an endowment? What were they thinking even with an endowment? That's something that you see in the financial landscape a lot, but what went into that public discussion and who were some of the big players?

As we were doing the research, it was exciting to see that as early as the 1960s, colleges were talking about how do we be smoke-free? I learned that SNU and Phillips Seminary, of course, were 100 percent smoke-free in the '60s, that other campuses had pockets of it, but it was exciting to see that this was something that Oklahoma had been embracing since before the Master Settlement Agreement before the nineties.

It was also really interesting to do some research and talk to members of our tribal communities around the sacred nature of tobacco in their culture, and put that in the book. We spend a lot of time talking about commercial tobacco, the harms, and the addictive nature of it, so it was enlightening to talk with some of the different members of tribes and understand the origin of tobacco, especially in our state. It's important, but we also know that tobacco use in our state and the toll of tobacco is outsized compared to other states.

S. Carson: The distinction between commercial tobacco and its sacred use among tribes is an important one. What else did you want people to know about tobacco use in Oklahoma and the start of TSET?

J. Bisbee: There's a lot of, one, history, but there are some real heroes and there are groups that came to the table because they believed in doing something big for the state. I think that that's something that Oklahoma, you often see in what we do. We're bold and don't really mind daring to do audacious things. That kind of Oklahoma Spirit shows through in the book, and also in the folks that were just sitting around thinking, "Okay, we know these settlement dollars are going to happen. We see what's happening in other states. How can we take that a step further? How can we dream a big dream and pull together a group who will say, 'This is important to health. This is important to young people, that they do not grow up with a tobacco habit.' How do we get that together?"

Even before the Master Settlement Agreement, those advocates in our state, the Hospital Association, the American Academy of Family Physicians, the State Medical Association, the State Department of Health, they were already watching what was happening at the national level and getting prepared. I think coming to TSET, I knew that maybe. But in doing the interviews and talking to people, they were singularly focused of how do we make the most of this opportunity? To hear about the seeds that were planted at a national conference I think that Drew Edmondson went to, or a national conference that founding board chair Bob McCaffrey went to where they heard from these attorney generals from other states really helped them say, "Okay, how do we get this idea and move it forward into policy?" Partnering with lawmakers, partnering with Jari Askins and other members of the House and the Senate to craft policy and legislation that gets you to a state question.

Doing the research and understanding that is that each leg of that journey, there was a champion and they had to be trusting and willing to hand off for that next leg. That's a lot of what we think about our work with TSET as well, is you've got to talk to communities. You've got to bubble it up. You've got to have a champion. The TSET origin story is no different.

S. Carson: A couple of things you said really struck me. One is how far back the discussions and efforts for tobacco-free environments go, way back to the sixties – decades before the Master Settlement Agreement of 1998.

The other thing you mentioned is how many people have been involved. It's kind of like a gold medal-winning relay race. You think about the Olympics and a four-by-400 relay track team, and it sounds like health and medical organizations, the attorney general, legislators and the governor each took their turns formed a great relay gold medal team.

J. Bisbee: Absolutely. I think along the way, all of them had to have an eye on the prize. I mean, when you're talking about an endowment or you're talking about a settlement, it can be many years before your state actually reaps the benefits of that. In the late nineties, I'm sure our state had financial needs. They had to say, "But this is special. This is unique." Then the people of Oklahoma, the voters came along and said, "We agree. We don't want these dollars to be part of just a general budget. We know that they came to the

state on the backs of tobacco users, the harms, the deaths caused by tobacco, and that money should be set aside for things that help to reduce the toll of tobacco."

Oklahomans have been consistent in that support, and so it is very inspiring. Also, you feel very grateful to have that level of trust, that the people of Oklahoma are saying, "Continue to do that good work. Continue to help-

S. Carson: Any thoughts on the book's importance, now that it's out?

J. Bisbee: As we went through and did these interviews, it was important to capture their voices. Here we are 25 years later, none of us are getting any younger. How did you capture the spirit that Drew Edmondson had, that this was a righteous lawsuit, that the tobacco industry was harming his state, to Jari Askins being very pragmatic but also passionate in saying, "We got to do this different because it's special," and being a champion all along, to Frank Keating saying, "I think this is something that the people need to do," and actually vetoing the first run at legislation.

The process works, but also in writing this book, it highlights that you have to be patient and committed. I think that's a good reminder for where we are sometimes in our efforts to reduce the toll of tobacco or to increase smoke-free environments. Tobacco policy is a long game.

S. Carson: What an amazing story. A lot of people may know TSET from the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline or through maybe a Healthy Living Program grant in their county, but what are some other programs and projects that TSET has funded, or at least helped to fund, over the past 25 years that folks might go, "Wow, I didn't realize that"?

J. Bisbee: Yeah, I think one that is worth pointing out always is Stephenson Cancer Center. That was something that did not exist when TSET was created and now, Oklahoma has a national recognized NCI-designated cancer center. What that means for the average person who maybe isn't thinking about their risk of cancer is that they or their loved ones have a 25% higher chance of surviving cancer because there is such a high caliber center in the state. That's something that TSET has been a supporter of over the years.

I also think that listeners should know that TSET also helps to support getting doctors into rural areas through a loan repayment program that we partner with the Healthcare Workforce Training Commission that's getting primary care doctors out into the communities, out in the rural areas. We are helping to pay off those loans, which most doctors are graduating with over \$200,000 in debt. We're helping to offset that so that they can follow their passion for community medicine, so we do that.

Of course, folks know us for our media campaigns, which when we travel out of the state or we go to conferences and look at pure states, that's something that Oklahoma really has heads and tails above other states, is the ability to consistently provide

information to Oklahomans about healthy choices through Shape Your Future, Tobacco Stops with Me-

S. Carson: Speaking about that, a lot of the folks may not realize how much money is spent in our state on tobacco marketing, or ads for foods that may not be as healthy. TSET's media messages counteract that.

J. Bisbee Absolutely. We know that the tobacco industry, the food industry is also seeking customers at every turn. Something that TSET can do to support informed and healthy choices for Oklahomans is to also be there to say, "Or you could have water, or smoking is not going to prolong your life." That is really something that I think adds to the work that we're doing in communities, adds to the work that we're doing with tobacco cessation. Ultimately, we want to reduce the demand for cancer care. All of these things are how do we help Oklahomans at a younger age or start out with healthy habits, and avoid some of those chronic diseases that we see our state is overrepresented in.

The other thing I think is always something that maybe folks don't always know, but in our community work, we are also helping communities lead change on their own. We have either the Healthy Living Program or the incentive grants.

I think that sometimes an unstated benefit. Communities across the state have been transformed over the past 20 years. You just look at how Oklahoma has grown. TSET is a part of that. TSET is helping to inform. TSET is helping to pave trails. TSET is ensuring that there are smoke-free environments. All of those things lead to a better quality of life, a place where people want to be, raise their kids, and so I think that is something that I would point out also as a success.

S. Carson: That's a really good point. So much of the improvement in terms of healthier environments come at the local level. There's a lot of incentive and vigor out there from people wanting to do better for themselves, their kids, and their grandkids. TSET helps them meet their goals with these funding opportunities.

J. Bisbee: That is one of the nice things about the work that TSET does. We are partnering at the local level or at the university level or whomever we are making grants, with shared goals for what is best for Oklahoma. I think that that is a strength to creating that change that's going to outlast all of us.

S. Carson: Definitely. You mentioned TSET programs that have been in place for a number of years. But the agency has also launched new funding opportunities and grant programs, including this fiscal year. So generally speaking, why the expansion when things are already working? Are there any newer grants that are worth noting in particular?

J. Bisbee: This fiscal year is kind of a transition year. You are seeing our Healthy Living Program, which has been successful and popular, sunset in June, and you are seeing us launch more funding opportunities than we ever have in a single year with our single strategy

grants. It's a lot of grantmaking speak, but essentially, with those single strategy grants, we're saying, "What is the change that we believe would be helpful at the local level?"

We wanted to be sure that the new funding opportunities are led at the local level, which is kind of a shift. I mean, we've been making grants now for over 20 years. We have designed programs that we know work and are based on evidence, and what's happening in other states, but we also know that those solutions happen at the local level.

And so we are transitioning. I know folks are seeing that, but we're also thinking about what is that next big thing and planning for the future. Our legacy grants are open right now. We've seen incredible applications. We've seen more demand than we could possibly fund, which is a thing in grant-making. You do have to tell people no. But it's also really exciting that so many organizations want to put together programs related to health, related to helping their neighbors live healthier lives, related to addressing the risk factors for cancer.

That tells me there's critical mass out there. That tells me that Oklahoma is not content to be in the bottom 10 in health rankings, and we want to capitalize on that momentum. Our community-based grants have been game changers for decades. Now it's time to try something different, and see how impactful that would be.

S. Carson: That all sounds pretty exciting for local communities. Now I want to ask about TSET's structure. You mentioned a little earlier how TSET is a unique state agency in how it's funded and governed. How has that structure contributed to TSET's growth and success over the past quarter-century?

J. Bisbee: That's a good question. Per the Constitution, TSET has two boards, which I think is important. We have a board of directors that oversees how the earnings from the endowment are spent, and then we have a board of investors that oversees how the endowment is invested. I think that's an important separation that allows you to attract expertise to your different boards. The state treasurer chairs the board of investors. We have an elected board of directors chair.

Our board of directors serve seven-year terms, which as I've talked to the folks who helped to write the language for the constitutional amendment, that was really important to them. It was important that this board that's making investments for the long term has the ability to see that investment pay off in the ROI. That longer board term is important because sometimes strategies take 5 years, sometimes they take 10 years. The stability of the board of directors has been very helpful in helping us to be effective in changing health outcomes, reducing smoking, cutting youth smoking in half because there is a tolerance to know what seeds we're planting today are going to yield or bear fruit in a decade or so.

We have board members appointed by seven different elected officials. They are politically diverse. They represent all of the congressional districts. Not only do we have

a politically diverse board, but we also, in our structure, address what is happening in rural areas, what is happening in urban areas. It brings together all of those perspectives so that we truly are seeking to meet the needs of all of Oklahoma.

S. Carson: That sounds like a winning formula.

J. Bisbee: Yes, I'm proud of it.

S. Carson: Finally, Julie, you have been with TSET for nearly 14 years, which is more than half of the agency's existence, if you can believe it. So thinking back on that time, what milestones have you seen during your time here relating to any TSET program or partnership that you're really proud of or that perhaps encourages you about the future of health in Oklahoma?

J. Bisbee: Yeah, thank you. I started as the public information officer for TSET, working under the founding executive director, Tracey Strader. So in that capacity, I was really proud that our agency put together a history video, capturing that history for the first time, releasing that on YouTube, et cetera. And then to also now be part of the history book. It's really important to me that, as kind of the guardian of that narrative, that we are getting that out in multiple mediums because Oklahomans should feel very proud about what they created with TSET.

And then in terms of the work that TSET has done, I have a fondness for policy. I think laws change people's environments. They improve their health. And so, some of the things, when I think back about that time, we collectively, advocates for health, got legislation passed that makes all schools 24/7 tobacco free. That was something that our local grantees were working on in school districts. And then we got to a place where more than 80% of districts were already doing it, and we were able to get a law passed that protects all Oklahoma children from smoke and tobacco use.

And at the same time, there was also a movement to talk about smoke-free policies at the local level. And so an advocacy group and TSET informing and working at the local level, we got the ability for cities to make their property smoke-free. And that was also a big stride. There is a tobacco-free future.

S. Carson: Yeah.

J. Bisbee: Programmatically, when I think back Stephenson Cancer Center was just kind of starting when I started at TSET. And after having been here 14 years, we've seen them to National Cancer Institute designation to be in the top among cancer centers, enrolling people in clinical trials, and expanding their network of sites where you can get clinical trials across the state. And that's really exciting to see as well.

And I think too, the creation of the TSET Health Promotion Research Center. So we're actually looking at what are the behaviors, the risks that lead to cancer diagnosis, and

how can we work to mitigate that? How can we do research around improving the quality of life for cancer patients? And so it's nice to have seen that come to fruition.

I also think we have seen our budget grow tremendously, which for us means we're able to impact more communities in Oklahoma, more school districts, more, getting more physicians out in the state. And that's been really exciting to think about the trajectory of growth. How are we getting these dollars to impact, whether that's helping to fund a physician residency in rural Oklahoma, which we do that with our partners at OSU. Funding doctors in rural areas. They work to promote cessation. They work to make sure that their patients that are using tobacco are getting a seamless referral to the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline.

And so those are some things that I get excited about, thinking about my time here.-The smoking rate has declined tremendously during that time. I think when I started at TSET, it was in the mid-twenties, 20% or more of adults that were smoking. This year, we're excited to report that it's 14%. And I know that that change takes time, is something that we have all been pursuing over the years, and that is a tremendous progress.

We had a study a few years back that showed that smoking had declined 10 times faster in Oklahoma than other states that have a similar policy and price environment. And I think that speaks to the ongoing consistent investment that TSET and other partners make in ensuring that Oklahomans, one, understand the harms of tobacco use. Understand there is free help with the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline. And their environments, their workplaces, their schools support, again, a smoke-free, tobacco-free environment. So I feel really fortunate to have been part of that change that is helping so many Oklahomans

S. Carson: So much has happened to improve health in Oklahoma during TSET's first quarter century – and certainly in the nearly 14 years you have seen firsthand.

J. Bisbee: Yeah, it's been a great ride, and I look forward to the future.

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S. Carson: Julie touched on many ways TSET has impacted the health of Oklahomans, and yet there are other programs and initiatives that we didn't have time to delve into. The story of how TSET came to be, and how it was structured in a way that maximizes its potential to improve health, truly is compelling.

J. Tyree: Many people have seen and heard health intervention messaging on ads and social media that inform people how to live healthier and tobacco-free. They're also aware of statewide programs like the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline that have helped hundreds of thousands of Oklahomans. But for 20-plus years now, many Oklahomans are most familiar with TSET through its local wellness grant programs.



I recently spoke with a local coordinator of one such program that, over time, has made a huge difference residents and visitors in that her service area. Let's meet her and hear her story.

Cunningham: I am Melissa Cunningham, and I am the TSET IMPACT Coordinator for Delaware County.

J. Tyree: You have coordinated TSET community-based grants in Delaware County for a number of years, so let's start there. Where is Delaware County, what are some things it's known for and what do you like most about the area?

Cunningham: Delaware County is located in the northeast corner of the state, so we border Arkansas and Missouri. And I would say that we are known most for recreational opportunities centered around Grand Lake O' the Cherokees and Lake Eucha. Grand Lake draws in visitors for basically boating, swimming, water sports, and Lake Eucha for fishing.

Aside from the recreational stuff, I think it's very important to mention that Delaware County is located within the Cherokee Nation Reservation, so we have the strong historical ties there, and we're also recognized for agricultural industry, particularly chicken and poultry farming. We also have cattle production. We're about 792 square miles, so we're a rather large county. And of that, about 54 is comprised of those two lakes that I mentioned. so it creates an issue with travel because you have to go around the lake in a lot of places. So from one end to the other can be a good little trip.

J. Tyree: When looking at local wellness data, or if going by what you or anyone would see when just walking or driving around, how would you describe your county in terms of its health?

Cunningham: Probably the things that would get their attention the quickest would be the fact that we have challenges with access to healthcare and access to affordable, healthy foods, specifically in the southernmost parts of the county. We are a food desert in lots of areas, but mid-county to southern part of the county is very rural. So those issues become more prevalent.

And I think for those of us that have been longtime residents, we're used to, you don't go five minutes down the road to the grocery store and grab something. It's a minimum of 20 miles, I would say, for most people to go get groceries or to go to the doctor type of thing. So when you're used to it, you're used to a drive, you coordinate and you schedule around those things. It's not be a quick trip of, oh, I forgot, I will run by the store. It doesn't really work that way.

As far as health indicators, unfortunately, we have a high prevalence of obesity, heart disease, smoking. Our life expectancy is a little bit lower than national average. So those are not things that we're super happy about, and we're working really hard to turn those around for sure.

J. Tyree: TSET is celebrating its first 25 years, and in that time, the TSET Healthy Living Program has definitely contributed to helping Oklahomans, well, live healthier as the name implies. As HLP coordinators in Delaware County, what goals and objectives, based on local needs, did you and colleague Nancy Robbins work toward and try to accomplish?

Cunningham: I feel like we've had a whole lot of success through the years. Nancy and I have done this since about 2015, so we're 10 plus years into TSET programming in Delaware County. Nancy and I had both been educators and when we first started and we were doing data collection and trying to determine where best to go to serve the most people, we really landed on schools. And it makes sense for a lot of our communities because in several of them, the school is the community. There may be no other resources in that community. So going to the school allowed us to impact more people from one location. So working with the schools was our target for about the first five years.

And then as we moved on into the next five year cycle, we really started to focus on cities, on those municipalities, and really for the same reason that we targeted the schools, was trying to get more bang for our buck, being able to impact more people in one area through policy work and environmental change.

J. Tyree: What one or two — or three — policies, events or projects are you most proud of that really made a difference in one of your communities?

Cunningham: We look back to 10 years ago when we started on the conversations that we had versus the kind of conversations that we're able to have now. When we started, it was really difficult. People did not even hardly know how to talk about physical activity. It was kind of like crickets when you said, "What are some things that you would like to have?" And I think, not that they didn't want things, but they hadn't had those conversations before. So they really didn't even know what they could want for and what the possibilities were.

Cunningham: So communities might have a city park. It may not get much use, it may not be deemed by the public as a super inviting, maybe safe space, but they had one. So it was taken for granted. And when we started getting to have those conversations and show examples and talk about specific things, once they got their creative juices flowing, then it was, wow, well, we could do this and we could do that.

Cunningham: And what about a splash pad? And well, these swings are broken. Do you think maybe we should fix those, type thing. And then it was, well, let's get some lighting. And things have just totally morphed through the years into a very positive atmosphere for us where so many conversations revolve around physical activity. How can we make this better? How can we provide resources for people of all ages? Our parks are not just for young children anymore.

So things have changed so much, and we are so proud of the work that our communities specifically have done related to their parks and the use that they get now. You can drive by now and you see families there. We've worked on some pickleball courts, we've worked on some playground equipment, some field, just making things look better, feel better, be more accessible. And it is so exciting to go by and see families there, kids of all ages.

And then we've actually, we've had some unsolicited posts on social media that were actually positive. People posting pictures of the new pickleball courts and playing with their families and saying, "Thank you." This was specifically in Jay, where this happened, saying, "Thank you so much. We appreciate the work that you've done here. We love this." And it's really exciting to see that change. While we were going through it, we didn't feel like a whole lot of change was taking place, but now that we look back, there's just a huge amount of projects that have taken place and things look totally different in a good way.

J. Tyree: It sounds like the TSET Healthy Living Program had really become engrained in health and wellness conversations and actions in Delaware County.

Cunningham: Absolutely. It really has. Yes, we are very excited. And now it is when you see these community members, when I see these community leaders, I'll get text messages, I'll get phone calls, see them at a meeting, and this stuff just comes up automatically now, of what do you think about this? How could we improve this? What about funding for this? We're working on this. So it's an active conversation that takes place now, even when we are not there. And that, I feel like we have done our job.

J. Tyree: After many years of ROCMND being a local Healthy Living Program lead agency, you're part of a new TSET community-based program called the Impact Network. What, exactly, *is* the TSET Impact Network and what does your work entail? And how is it similar and different from the HLP and what do you hope to accomplish?

Cunningham: The IMPACT is "inspiring meaningful public action for community transformation." And really this is just an expansion for us of those Healthy Living Program strategies. This program allows us to be innovative with our community, work with those partners, and again, that emphasis of collaboration that we've had all of this time, and continuing on and meeting them where they are and where their needs are.

And so I think in TSET IMPACT for the next three years, we are going to try to build on those foundations of policy work, of ordinances, of things that have been put in place. Communities, schools, businesses, organizations have said these things are important to us. We have put this in writing. We have made this official. Now how do we implement? How do we make this real?

We've already worked on several projects this year. The Food Pantry of Grove, we had a great resource event and a really great partnership with them. They're doing some phenomenal things there. Work with schools and their youth groups on some tobacco cessation. Vaping has been highlighted, unfortunately, as a growing phenomenon. So those are things that our partners are saying, "This is really a top priority for us. How can you help us?" So the tobacco cessation specifically with vaping is something that we are working on at this very moment.

And then physical activity stuff, safe routes to school, that is a huge project that we're working on in several of our communities. We have some big things going related to safe routes to school. We've accomplished a lot and have a lot of active partners that have a lot of great things in mind and would like our help and help from some of our other collaborating partners. Cherokee Nation Health Educators have been fantastic to work with. We do an awful lot with them, and they have a huge impact in our county as well. And we are able to focus on some similar objectives and work together, and one group brings in something that the other isn't able to, and it really rounds out nicely.

J. Tyree: Here's a final question for you — what was your area's tobacco environment like 25 years ago when TSET was created, and how does it compare to now?

Cunningham: When you're in the middle of it, you don't always see the change or the progress that you're making. But when I look back, I feel like in the past there was a much higher prevalence of tobacco use, smoking; more smokeless tobacco as well.

And I think now probably the biggest thing that I feel is that there's a growing kind of negative stigma around tobacco use, and I would say specifically in public places. I feel like now there's an increasing support for more tobacco free spaces. It's primarily a given now that it's not allowed indoors, and that mentality is extending to include those outdoor spaces as well. And when we started, that was not really the case. I think there wasn't as much indoor smoking, but still, there was a lot more tobacco use that you saw in public places, in doorways, in parks, at ball games, that type of thing. And now people are becoming more cognizant of that. And it's sometimes even unspoken of, "Hey, that's not really allowed here. That's not something that we're interested in."

So I think just that mentality across the board has changed drastically from certainly 25 years ago, back when I was young, and then even 10 years ago when we started this program. So we are making strides in the right direction for sure.

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J. Tyree: Working as a health communication consultant for TSET grantees before taking my current position, I got to see up close and in person a lot of changes for the better from the Oklahoma Panhandle to the Arkansas border. And these changes resulted from community leaders, groups and individuals working with local TSET grantees like Melissa and Nancy in Delaware County to improve access to nutrition, safer and more inviting

parks and trails, and way more tobacco-free areas where residents and visitors alike can breathe cleaner air.

S. Carson: Local organizations and public entities have also applied for and used Healthy Incentive grants from schools and communities, and the newer Built Environment and Discovery grants for projects and programs designed to improve health and wellness for people of all ages. You can learn more about these funding opportunities by visiting <https://oklahoma.gov/tset>.

TSET also funds research and statewide programs that help Oklahomans live healthier and longer, and our next guest has known about the tobacco settlement endowment's potential for improving health, even before TSET was created. Let's meet him now and listen to a conversation he had recently with James.

S. Crawford: I'm Dr. Steven Crawford. I am a family physician in Oklahoma. I currently serve in a variety of roles as a family physician. I'm not actively seeing patients, but I do teach in what's called our resident clinic at the University of Oklahoma's Family Medicine Residency program. I also serve as a professor emeritus at the University of Oklahoma on a variety of projects we have going on, some of which are to help encourage people from tribal, rural, and underserved communities come into healthcare professions, trying to recruit them and help them get into medical school. So a variety of things I'm doing. I also serve as co-chair of the Legislative Committee of the Oklahoma Academy of Family Physicians.

J. Tyree: So of course, most people know what it's like to go into a doctor's visit, visit with their primary care physician, but what's it like for a family physician to be at work and have patients come in to see you? What did you enjoy most about the job and what did you kind of dread about it?

S. Crawford: Well, the enjoyment was interacting with people. I hoped, over time, that I became essentially a friend to my patients, and a guide. I didn't become a commander or a ruler. I became somebody that could help advise them appropriately. Obviously, I had skills of exam to be able to help diagnose things, but I also could provide counseling about choices and health.

J. Tyree: As you well know, TSET was created 25 years ago by statewide vote to decrease tobacco use, which often leads to cancer, cardiovascular disease, and premature deaths. Now, you recently wrote an op-ed piece in The Oklahoman newspaper about TSET's effect on health outcomes and how it operates. What inspired or influenced you to write the column?

S. Crawford: Well, I think I am honored to tell you this interesting story.

J. Tyree: We are all ears!

S. Crawford: Well, I was at a conference in Dallas, Texas, that the American Academy of Family Physicians puts on, it's a regional conference, 26, 27 years ago, and they bring in people to talk about things. Well, what was happening at that time was the tobacco settlement nationally. And we had a speaker who was the lead attorney general for that tobacco settlement who was out of Mississippi. His name was Michael Moore.

He came and talked, and I was there with my executive director of our academy. He's not a family physician. He was a guy that ran our business of the academy, a guy named Sam Blackstock. And Sam B was our executive director at the time and he said, we got to get this guy to Oklahoma, because one of the things he advocated was to use the money and put it into an endowment that was protected by a state question so that those monies would be used for healthcare, not for building roads to prisons, as the saying goes, but for things not related to the whole reason for the lawsuit.

~~We~~ We had a wonderful governmental consultant. Her name was Claudia Kamas. And we said, what are we going to do with this if we get them up here? And we said, why don't we get all the legislators who have an interest and have them meet Michael Moore and hear him talk about this? And so we set up a meeting at the Waterford Hotel, and essentially we sparked the fire as it were. He flew in and he came and gave the talk and we didn't have to do anything else. The legislative leaders heard his speech and said, "We're going to initiate a state question to set up what became TSET."

J. Tyree: And all these years later, TSET is still here.

S. Crawford: The important part of this. One, was to be an endowment. To put the money and use the investment proceeds of that, not to use the corpus because we're going to get a lot of money, and how do we make this sustainable over years and years and years? Because it's going to take decades to counter the effects of the tobacco company's damage to our state. That's the first. The second is that because this is a lot of money, the system will want access to that in any way they can because there're going to be ups and downs in the economy of the state. And they're going to look at this very enviously that this money could be used for this special projects we have that isn't related to healthcare (or) could be related to healthcare, but it should be directed by a non-political body.

And that's the "why" it was set up the way it was. It was set up by the politicians, but voted into place by the people of Oklahoma. And the people of Oklahoma said, "We don't want the influence of politics to affect how these monies are spent. And they did set it up that a certain amount of the money would go to the state legislature for its use. And the attorney general got a certain amount of the money too, out of the settlement. It wasn't that it was a hundred percent to TSET, but some of it does, every payment, go to the state. But the majority goes to the endowment for the purpose that the state, the legislators, and then the people voted on that it wanted to go to.

J. Tyree: We're 27 years later now. When you think about TSET's programs and funding and things at this point, how are they now compared to what you imagined it could be back then?

S. Crawford: Well, we've been very successful in helping people stop tobacco use and preventing tobacco use, which is even more valuable because you don't want people to even start, because once they start, it's hard to stop. But we've been very successful on both sides of that. And there's been different ways that the tobacco companies have tried to weasel in on that, particularly with vaping and those kinds of things, thinking, oh, it's safer, and that type of stuff.

And TSET has certainly changed to make sure that they've advocated for that. But they've also addressed other health issues that are very critical to our state. I think one of the most significant is helping get a NCI designated cancer center for our state so people don't have to go out of state to MD Anderson or Mayo Clinic, or whatever, to seek top-notch cancer care. And it is looked at that by many to be a place to go for that type of care.

But it also, in other areas, childhood obesity or even adult obesity, trying to help people eat better, trying to help fitness and other health areas of our state. Something that's very personal to me was the support of scholarships to get students who are healthcare professionals out to rural areas that are lacking healthcare professionals, to help encourage that. What was then called the Physician Manpower Training Commission is now called the Healthcare Training Commission, I think. But they came to the commission and said, we'd like to sponsor a program with our endowment monies to help recruit practitioners to rural, underserved areas.

They know that those rural, underserved areas where needing people who could be healthcare advocates, who would also help prevent people from smoking or would help them get off of tobacco if they're there. So that combination was very relevant and very important, and I thought (it) was a wonderful circle back around to something we've always advocated as an academy to having. We were obviously there at the beginning of the birth of TSET, and to help them with a project we were very focused on, kind of indirectly, because it doesn't necessarily benefit our academy directly other than if we get more family physicians, we have more members. But that wasn't the purpose. It was to improve the health of Oklahomans.

J. Tyree: Dr. Steven Crawford, thank you very much for joining us today.

S. Crawford: Well, thank you, sir. I appreciate being part of this. And congratulate the folks that work at TSET. They've done a wonderful job to help continue the vision that we hopefully ignited here in Oklahoma. And we're one of the few states that use the money, I think, properly.

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- S. Carson: You know Dr. Crawford's philosophy on working in collaboration with patients to improve their health is similar to TSET's way of partnering with local groups and health care organizations to achieve better outcomes for Oklahomans. He echoed Julie Bisbee's comments, albeit from his physician group's perspective, just how many people were involved with the formation of TSET from the outset.
- J. Tyree: We want to thank Dr. Steven Crawford, Melissa Cunningham and TSET Executive Director Julie Bisbee for joining us for this episode. And we thank you, our listeners, for your time and interest, along with every person – and there are many out there – who has ever supported or participated in any TSET program, project or initiative over these past 25 years..
- S. Carson: Remember, you can listen to this or any episode of the TSET Better Health Podcast at [oklahoma.gov/tset/podcast](http://oklahoma.gov/tset/podcast) or anywhere you listen to podcasts. Thanks again for joining us today, happy holidays to you all, and until next time, this is Sarah Carson ...
- J. Tyree: And James Tyree wishing you peace ...
- S. Carson: And better health!