

TSET Better Health Podcast Transcript

Episode 51: Swapping Up To Better Nutrition For All Ages

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Summary: People of all ages feel better when they eat healthier, and there are programs that are helping Oklahomans choose and access nutritious foods. For National Nutrition Month, Episode 51 of the TSET Better Health Podcast features Meredith Scott, director of the Oklahoma Nutrition Information and Education (ONIE) Project, and Melissa Vilas of Rescue Agency and the Swap Up nutrition education program for teens.

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[Theme music]

James Tyree: Hello everyone! Welcome to the TSET Better Health Podcast. This is Episode 51 and I am your host, James Tyree, associate director of Integrated Communications at TSET ...

Sarah Carson: And I am Sarah Carson, campaign manager for TSET. Thank you for joining us today. Spring has sprung in Oklahoma, which means warmer and longer days are heading our way – along with growing seasons for local fruits and vegetables. In fact, March is National Nutrition Month and many farmers markets open in April.

J. Tyree: Ah, fresh, delicious food – you are speaking my language, Sarah. At the TSET office, colleagues take turns bringing healthy snacks to our small kitchen area, and I swear one of the tastiest things I ate all of last year was a sweet and juicy Stratford peach that Susan brought us. Just goes to show that nutritious foods can be really tasty too.

S. Carson: Yes, and I love fresh garden vegetables. However, a lot of people don't eat many fruits and vegetables on a regular basis. Half of Oklahomans eat less than one fruit per day on average and 1 in 4 average less than one vegetable a day.

This can happen for a number of reasons. Some people live in food deserts, where produce and other healthy foods are in short supply for miles around. Others feel they don't have enough time, money or both to eat healthy, so they grab something that's quick and easy – and often not very nutritious. And sometimes it simply comes down to unfamiliarity, folks both young and older who have rarely or never tried various fruits and vegetables.

J. Tyree: When you think about it, those and similar barriers to healthy foods come down to two key elements: choice and access. Today's guests are part of organizations that are helping Oklahomans choose healthy foods and have greater access to them.

S. Carson: Later in this episode, we will hear about a campaign here in Oklahoma that effectively speaks to teenagers to help them choose healthy snacks over junk food and fresh water

over sugary drinks. But first, let's hear James' conversation with the director of the ONIE Project and hear how that entity helps families eat healthier and local food producers supply the nutritious foods we want and need. Let's hear about the ONIE Project now.

M. Scott: I'm Meredith Scott and I am the director at the Oklahoma Nutrition Information and Education Project. We are housed at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences College of Public Health, in the Department of Health Promotion Sciences.

J. Tyree: What exactly does the ONIE Project do to help Oklahomans eat healthier?

M. Scott: Well, there's a lot of things going on when you think of the ONIE Project, and we're pretty excited about the evolution of our project, as we are truly trying to meet the needs of Oklahomans. But our main project is making the healthy choice the most doable and easy choice for Oklahomans. And that includes two major areas.

One is nutrition education, making sure that our Oklahoma families have access to unbiased opinions on what is nutritious through registered dietitians, healthy recipes, different resources on how to be the best consumer and make the best decisions for your family.

And then the other side is looking at our food system, and what can we do to help make the healthy choice the most accessible choice? And in that, we work a lot with our local food systems and agriculture and have a whole branch of project called the Oklahoma Local Ag Collaborative that really supports our farmers and our farmers' markets, farm stands, farm hubs. Anywhere we can get access to food for our Oklahoma families and helping them be able to accept benefits, have the latest and greatest technology available, making sure that they are aware of any opportunities available to help grow our local food system.

J. Tyree: You mentioned nutrition education. Where does this take place and how?

M. Scott: Many food banks across the state, you'll walk into the food bank and you'll see our recipe cards next to the featured produce. Or if you go to even a waiting room in a clinic, we have reels of one-minute cooking videos that we provide to these clinics to have it, so they're actually watching something that will help improve the nutrition of their patients. And so we're always looking for innovative ideas and partnerships and collaborations where we can leverage resources to really serve Oklahomans and give them the resources that are truly available to them.

J. Tyree: And how does the ONIE Project help more people access or even want to try more healthy foods?

M. Scott: One of the things that came of working with nutrition, We are always trying to figure out, how do we get families to feel more comfortable eating produce? And we've done a lot of interviews and focus groups and trying to understand what are some of the barriers. And a lot of it has to do with having maybe not the highest quality product in

front of them. And so if you have a peach that tastes like cardboard, you're not going to like peaches. But if you have a peach that was grown in Oklahoma, just picked, ready to go, and you take a bite of that, that is a tastiest thing ever. And you're going to love peaches and you're going to want more peaches.

And so working with our local food system where our families can get the highest quality food on the plates that tastes amazing. I mean, a homegrown tomato, fresh-picked okra, a crisp cucumber, these are all beautiful things that make people want to eat more vegetables.

J. Tyree: Farmers markets are a great way to connect folks wanting to eat healthy with local food producers.

M. Scott: Oh, yes. The economy as well as it tastes good. It helps the economy, and there's just something about the social component of it, too, engaging with other people, teaching your family about ... I know taking my girls to the farmers' market, they meet the farmer or they see a picture of the chicken that we're buying. I don't know. It's just connecting with the food in another way.

J. Tyree: Can you tell us how the ONIE Project helped local producers provide some of that tasty produce to families with limited resources?

M. Scott: And so we saw that there was a need to really support these direct-to-consumer producers and started working with, how do we make sure that these farmers' markets and farm stands have the ability to accept benefit programs such as WIC, SNAP, senior benefits, so more families can have access? And now we have over 84 farmers' markets and farm stands accepting benefit programs. Beautiful. Helping increase access across our state.

J. Tyree: I agree, Meredith. Having 84 farmers markets and stands across the state that accepts nutrition benefits really does expand access to healthy foods who may not otherwise afford them. What are some of the resources you offer directly to consumers?

M. Scott: Yes, we have a lot of resources available. The recipe card, our nutrition calendar that we distribute for free, all of our resources are free. Some other projects that we have is we have a Tasty Text program where people can sign up and receive nutritional nudges, such as maybe a healthy recipe or a tip on how to add in a certain thing or how to pick a certain vegetable or what's in season. You can sign up on our website, ONIEproject.org. We also have a plethora of recipes. Oh my gosh, so many beautiful recipes. Our dieticians are currently, honestly, in the food lab right now, cooking up new recipes. We taste test them all. We know that they're good and they're nutritious. And so those are on choosehomemade.org. We made a website just for recipes, because it was getting so big and so many recipes. So choosehomemade.org.

And then we also provide cooking classes. We also partner with OSU and work with them with cooking classes.

I do feel strongly about our work. We do follow the dietary guidelines strictly. We make sure that everything we're saying is evidence-based and grounded in science. We follow a social marketing approach, which is similar to what Shape Your Future does.

J. Tyree: Is the ONIE Project working on anything new that you are excited about?

M. Scott: Well, we are working on a campaign right now to really promote some food resources. Right now we're seeing, our families are telling us that stretching the food dollar is getting harder and harder. What we can do is help share some tips and ideas on how to stretch that food dollar. So through our Choose Homemade project, we will be doing some extra promotion and sharing of resources, especially through Tasty Texts and whatnot, of ways to stretch that food dollar, make the most.

Another big project that we're excited about and we're continuing to look for partners for is our Let's Get Moving initiative. We've been working with Mid-Del Schools and now Lawton to expand "Let's Get Moving," not only in the community, but also in the curriculum, school curriculum, and working with the Oklahoma Standards of Education to meet the necessary guidelines but really helping continue on making physical activity a regular part of people's day.

J. Tyree: Nutrition and physical activity in schools, that sounds great. Speaking of children, in addition to being ONIE's director, you also are the mother of two very young kids. Do you have any advice to offer our listeners from your role and experience as a mom?

M. Scott: Children want to hang out. Right now, my children are at the ages where they enjoy hanging out with me and having them cook with me and teaching them skills in the kitchen. It is messy. It takes double the time. But I find it as I think I'm making some core memories, and they love it. And honestly, if they help cook, they are more likely to eat it. So really trying things with them has been really fun and cooking with them.

One other, just, my mom did this with me, and as my daughters get older, I'm going to do that with them. But whenever I was in my elementary and middle school age, I would go, when I went shopping with my mom, she would have me pick out a vegetable, any vegetable, and we would then go find a recipe together and then make it. And so that is also another thing that being able to even be a part of the choosing of the product and what is going to be made was also fun. And of course, she had limitations to it, but yeah.

J. Tyree: Thank you, Meredith, we really appreciate your time with us, ONIE's efforts that help Oklahomans eat better and for your tips on ways to encourage younger kids to embrace healthy eating.

M. Scott: Well, thank you, James, for inviting me and letting me share more about the ONIE Project. Always appreciate the collaboration with TSET and Shape your Future.

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- S. Carson: ONIE has worked with TSET over the years on various program and communication-related projects, most notably the Oklahoma Local Agricultural Summit that ONIE facilitates with the Oklahoma Dept. of Agriculture, Food and Forestry. And Meredith mentioned Shape Your Future, the TSET brand that offers a wealth of recipes, resources and money-saving tips for helping families and individuals eat healthier. That information can be found at <https://ShapeYourFutureOK.com>, where you can also sign up for helpful monthly e-newsletters.
- J. Tyree: And you can learn more about the ONIE Project's nutrition-related initiatives and resources for food producers, educators, community organizations and anyone interested in providing or accessing healthy foods for their household or community by visiting <https://onieproject.org>.
- S. Carson: Both ONIE and Shape Your Future help Oklahomans of **all** ages find practical and tasty ways to eat healthier. But how do you help teenagers choose nutritious options at or after school, or when they're out with friends, especially when they're bombarded with less healthy food and drink options?
- Well, TSET partners with an agency that specializes in health messaging that teenagers relate and respond to. One of those messaging campaigns is called Swap Up and it's about nutrition. Let's hear more about it from a conversation between James and the campaign's manager.
- Melissa Vilas: My name's Melissa Vilas. I work at Rescue Agency and I'm a senior account manager, and I've been here for about three years. And I work specifically mainly on the nutrition sector for our work.
- Oklahoma actually has the eighth-highest youth obesity rate in the nation. There's approximately 150,000 children classified as overweight or obese in the state. So to address this issue, the TSET Healthy Youth Initiative partnered with Rescue Agency to create the Swap Up campaign. So it launched back in 2021, and Swap Up is dedicated to preventing youth obesity across the state by delivering practical, relatable nutrition messages, that teens can actually incorporate into their daily life.
- J. Tyree: What kind of nutrition messages?
- M. Vilas: So it highlights how foods and drinks can directly impact how teens think, feel, and perform. Its goal is to shift knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about fruits, vegetables, water, and sugar sweetened beverages. Ultimately, trying to encourage an increased consumption of water and produce, while reducing that sugar sweetened beverage intake. So we try to foster healthier habits and Swap Up aims to reduce obesity rates among Oklahoma teens.

- J. Tyree: How are you able to convey these messages on eating and hydrating healthier to teenagers in a way that speaks to them and not at them?
- M. Vilas: At Rescue, every campaign we create is rooted in research. So before we even thought about launching Swap Up, before we came up with a brand name back in 2021, we actually conducted in-depth research with Oklahoma teens to understand their thoughts, beliefs, values, and attitudes towards food and healthy eating. So what were they eating and why were they eating that?
- Through formative research, we've talked to over 400 teenagers, aged 13 through 18, and we discovered that while most teens want to be healthier, they don't really consider how their food choices impact them, especially in the long term. Instead, they tend to follow what their peers eat, prioritize taste or opt for affordable and convenient options. But we also found that teens are motivated by immediate benefits like increased energy, alertness, and improved brain performance or sports performance, linked to that healthier beverage choice.
- J. Tyree: That all sounds interesting – and about right. So what did you and your colleagues at Rescue do with this information?
- M. Vilas: So we use this insight and we applied our SAVI messaging, which is a proprietary messaging model we have at Rescue Agency, and we develop Swap Up. So SAVI stands for “specific, acceptable, viable, and impactful,” and the campaign provides teens with those ways to make healthier choices that actually fit into their daily life.
- So we make humorous and relatable messaging showing real life scenarios that teens experience. Whether at a sports game, studying with friends, grabbing food at a fast-food restaurant, things they're actually doing in their daily lives. Instead of focusing on long-term health consequences, we show how a simple food and drink swap can make them feel better in the moment. So instead of drinking soda before you study, maybe you drink water and that helps you focus more. By offering practical real world swaps, Swap Up makes healthy more acceptable and achievable for Oklahoma teens.
- J. Tyree: I have seen some of these ads and think they're great, but we're not the target audience. So what do teenagers think of the Swap Up campaign and its messaging?
- M. Vilas: It really resonates with the teens. 74% of teens surveyed in 2024 were aware of the ads and 85% of those teens said that Swap Up had given them helpful nutrition tips.
- J. Tyree: Those are encouraging numbers. Is there an ad or two that has been particularly successful?
- M. Vilas: We're actually developing our 12th and 13th campaign right now for Swap Up, and a lot of them are award-winning. But by far, the most award-winning one is “The Choice is Yours”, which is a campaign that ran from December 2023 to April 2024. It featured

teens at a sports practice or setting, deciding between water and a sugary beverage. Sportscasters narrated their choices, debunking the common belief that sugar sweetened beverages provide an energy boost. So you think about, "Hey, I'm going to drink this thing with sugar. I'm going to get energy to study or energy to play well." But that actually leads to a crash. And this ad emphasized that choosing water helps sustain energy without the crash.

So we actually had over 31 million views for this campaign. It really resonated with teens who said they saw themselves in characters facing real life decisions. Research showed that the promise of better sports performance and improved focus was a strong motivator for teens to actually choose water instead. And by demonstrating how those small choices, so just a tiny change in your beverage, can immediately impact how teens think, act and feel in everyday situations, it successfully engaged the audience and reinforced those healthier habits.

J. Tyree: Hold up – did you say that one campaign had 31 million views?

M. Vilas: Yep, 31 million views across all our platforms. So we're on Meta, we're on Snapchat, YouTube. And so 31 million across all of those platforms in that December through April time period. So we target specifically on places that we know teens are going every day anyway.

J. Tyree: OK, Melissa, the campaign's biggest day of the year is coming soon live to some schools in Oklahoma. Can you tell us about that?

M. Vilas: Yes. So Swap Up Day, it's happening on April 9th, and it offers a fun and engaging way to promote healthier snack and drink choices for teens in your community. So schools, state or local agencies, afterschool programs, community-based organizations – basically anyone serving those teenagers age 13 through 18, can receive a free event box with everything needed to host an interactive experience. And we're hoping to exceed the success of our first Swap Up day, which occurred in 2023, and reached approximately 17,000 students in one day.

So a highlight of the event is something we call the Swap Up Cafe. But instead of ordering food, teens actually order a feeling and receive a sample of food that supports that mood. For example, a teen can come up and say they want happy and they'll get a snack scientifically linked to boosting mood, like apple slices or sparkling water. This hands-on activity is a crowd favorite because who doesn't like samples of food? But it also allows teens to taste test healthy foods, while also learning how their choices can impact how they feel. Each event box includes a preloaded Visa gift card to cover the cost of those food samples, plus fun giveaways like water pouches, magnets, and a take home snack swapper activity, which helps teens make connections between how they eat and how they feel long after the event is over.

J. Tyree: That sounds like a ton of fun. How many Swap Up Day sites were there last time.

M. Vilas: Yeah, so in 2023 when we last had this, we had 71 different events sites across the entire state. And so schools across the entire state, as well as some after school programs or community centers, also participated. ... So we found that was a fun way to show teens that connection between they want to feel energized, they want to feel happy, they want to feel focused. And then what they could actually be eating in their daily life to achieve that past the event.

J. Tyree: How can teens and other interested folks learn more about Swap Up Day or the Swap Up program in general?

M. Vilas: So visiting SwapUpOK.com or the Swap Up OK YouTube page, teens can learn more about healthy swaps and how they can impact the way they think, act and feel. Teachers and teens can also explore Shape Your Future, which is another TSET funded program that educates Oklahomans on eating healthier, staying active, drinking water, and being tobacco free. The program offers valuable resources for parents, children, teens, teachers, businesses, and everyone in Oklahoma to make healthier choices easier.

Additionally, teens can check if their school participates in the Youth Action for Healthy Leadership, which we call YAHL, another TSET initiative that empowers youth to create lasting nutrition, physical activity and tobacco policies in their schools. Through YAHL, students develop leadership skills, earn community service hours, and actively contribute to a healthier Oklahoma. So teens attending YAHL participating schools can actually reach out to their school advisor to get involved. If they're really, really wanting to and their school isn't participating yet, they can always take the initiative by speaking with administrators, counselors, or teachers, about joining the program and advocating for healthier changes in their entire school community.

Yeah, exactly. We want to make sure that they're empowered and they can understand they can make a change in their life and in their community.

J. Tyree: That sounds great. Thank you for joining us today, Melissa.

M. Vilas: Yeah, thank you for having me. We're just trying to make Oklahomans healthier from youth and onward.

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S. Carson: Swap Up is just part of the TSET Healthy Youth Initiative that Melissa mentioned early in the conversation. The initiative also has a total of nine campaigns and programs that focus on tobacco prevention and cessation, vaping prevention and cessation, obesity prevention, increasing physical activity, youth leadership for teens and character building for making healthy choices for younger kids. You can find more information and links to webpages for each of these programs by visiting TSEHealthyYouth.com. But getting back to nutrition, we have something special planned for Swap Up Day.

J. Tyree: That's right, Sarah. The TSET Better Health Podcast will have its first special video special when Sam Carrillo and I visit a school participating in Swap Up Day on April 9. Sam is the audio producer for the podcast, but he's also a wonderful videographer who will capture what it's like for students and teachers on Swap Up Day through visuals and interviews. You, our podcast listeners, can become viewers of the special episode soon afterward.

S. Carson: In addition to our regularly scheduled audio podcast episodes, we expect this to be the first of occasional special video episodes. Remember, you can hear – or see – any episode by visiting our webpage at <https://oklahoma.gov/tset/podcast>. You can also listen to any audio episode wherever you listen to podcasts.

Before signing off, we want to thank Meredith Scott of the ONIE Project and Melissa Vilas of Rescue Agency for joining us today. Eat well, be well, and until next time, this is Sarah Carson ...

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

S. Carson: And better health.