

# Smoking out poor health

## Trust expands focus to include fitness, nutrition

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Published March 24, 2011 in Oklahoma City's *Journal Record*



Brett Allred with Smoke Free Oklahoma Coalition and Tiffany Beasley with Tobacco Use Prevention Service at the state Capitol Monday during an event of the Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust. (Maike Sabolich)

OKLAHOMA CITY – Oklahoma's Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust, which has invested in tobacco reduction programs for a decade, is expanding its goals to new healthy initiatives: nutrition and fitness.

The TSET was established in 2000 with a constitutional amendment stipulating that only the earnings from tobacco industry payments can be spent on programs to improve the health of Oklahomans; those earnings have grown to a high of \$18 million in fiscal year 2010. Now, a decade later and with a comprehensive layer of tobacco programs in place, TSET is increasing its reach into nutrition and fitness. Requests for proposals have been turned in, and in May TSET plans to award about \$1 million across 10 programs around the state.

"Because the earnings grow each year, we have been able to layer in all the pieces for the tobacco components," said Tracey Strader, executive director of TSET. "We knew that we needed to know what was next on the horizon; you can't plan early or often enough for these initiatives."

Many Oklahomans die from cancer and cardiovascular disease, largely caused by tobacco use, lack of physical activity and poor nutrition, Strader said. The TSET's tobacco focus isn't

going away, but it makes sense that fitness and nutrition become the next areas of attention, given Oklahoma's overall poor health outcomes, she said.

Because of its structure, TSET has the luxury of time. As with tobacco, investments in nutrition and fitness programs will be long-term, a necessity for change to take place, Strader said. Nor is TSET trying to reinvent the wheel – it is relying on partners and evidence-based research as it expands its focus. Community-based programs will be the initial areas of investment, Strader said.

“One of the things I credit the private foundations for is that they do grants for innovation and creativity, and they're trying to till the soil and find out what works and what doesn't work,” she said. “A lot of these foundations came together early on when they realized the childhood obesity epidemic was coming and said, ‘We need to create an evidence base as quickly as we possibly can.’ They're using lessons learned in tobacco to test the water on those things. So they've been generating research right and left that is very helpful and gives us enough evidence to feel pretty confident in some of the strategies. At TSET, we like to uptake things that have been proven to work and try to bring those to scale at a state level.”

Programs could range from community gardens to healthier food options in schools to affordable and accessible exercise options. As with tobacco efforts, policy has a tremendous effect on the success rate, Strader said. Healthy food must be comparably priced with less nutritious options, she said, and sidewalks and safe routes must be available. Similarly, when a site is tobacco-free, that policy makes it harder for people to smoke.

“It's those policy changes that are some of the best drivers of change in behavior,” she said. “With smokers, it's making it as inconvenient as possible to smoke. It's also a double impact, because you're protecting people from secondhand smoke. It's the same thing with nutrition and fitness – having policies in schools, in work sites ... it's really a sustainability issue. If you have a policy about it, it's not dependent on a teacher who has a passion, or it's not dependent on a particular manager in a business. It will live on. It's those policies, combined with the intervention and health education, that actually change those social norms.

“Things have changed a lot here, but we're slower at changing these types of behaviors than most states,” Strader said. “We're a frontier culture and we're very independent and believe in ‘live and let live,’ but I think what people miss is there is an impact on others from all these behaviors, whether it's secondhand smoke or obesity or paying extra money for health issues.”

It appears that Oklahoma will get some good news on its new smoking numbers. Strader said the data from 2010 has not yet been finalized, but it looks like the latest rate of smoking will be 24 percent, a drop from 25.7 percent the year before. Oklahoma is still

several percentage points behind other states, but the progress is good, Strader said. A continued drop in Oklahoma's smoking rate also is important because settlement payments are tied to the national average of smoking.

"What's happening now is that the national average is significantly lower – 19 or 20 percent – and we're sitting at 24," she said. "So we've already had payments reduced and we're still carrying a greater tax burden because our rate is higher."

The TSET invests in several other health areas, including research. For fiscal year 2011, it has budgeted \$1.15 million to the Oklahoma Tobacco Research Center and \$1.34 million to the Oklahoma Center for Adult Stem Cell Research. Nearly \$5 million in TSET funds are going to the Shape Your Future campaign, which aims to save 5,320 lives annually by meeting the national average in health outcomes.

The expanded focus for TSET is timely, said Casey Killblane, vice chair of the organization's board of directors. Because the constitutional language for TSET is broad, such a step is possible, she said. The TSET will employ the same indicators as with tobacco to track the new programs' growth and effect.

"I think it's the perfect time for TSET to begin working in this arena as well," Killblane said, "because there's some groundswell and excitement. This board has taken a serious approach – this is Oklahoma's money, and we need to be able to stand up and look everybody in the eye and say that we've invested this money to best of our knowledge, we're seeing results, and we'd spend it there again. We don't just want to give money because it's the thing to do."