

TSET Better Health Podcast Transcript

Episode 16: Food Equity: Grocery Stores and Double Up Oklahoma

June 29, 2021

Summary: Join the Better Health podcast team and special guests for a discussion on systemic causes and effects of poor nutrition in Oklahoma and some partnerships that are addressing it. Marc Jones, CEO of Homeland Acquisition Corporation, and Richard Comeau with Hunger Free Oklahoma break down the realities of food insecurity and what the Double Up Oklahoma program is doing to help. Jonathan Veal with RestoreOKC introduces listeners to a new grocery store in northeast Oklahoma City, Market at Eastpoint, and the importance of providing access to fresh fruits and vegetables to this food desert. Tune in to find out how you can work with local leaders to improve your community's access to healthy foods.

[Theme music]

[0:15]

James Tyree: Hello and welcome to the TSET Better Health Podcast. This is your co-host James Tyree, a health communication consultant at TSET.

Cate Howell: And this is Cate Howell, co-host and producer. Today, we're going to take a look at some of the amazing partnerships that have come together to address food insecurity and poor nutrition in Oklahoma. Between lack of options, accessibility and locations, nutrition is more complex than it seems. It's especially an issue for low-income Oklahomans, who have higher rates of obesity and poor nutrition in general, which often lead to poor health outcomes and higher medical expenses.

J. Tyree: Indeed. It is a complicated subject with different facets, but today, we're going to talk about the importance of conscientious grocers and their community partnerships. Our first segment introduces an important program called Double Up Oklahoma and someone who can tell us much more about it.

[1:13]

[Uplifting piano music ("[Innovative Approach](#)" by Pavel Yudin)]

Richard Comeau: My name is Richard Comeau. I'm the program director at Hunger Free Oklahoma.

J. Tyree: Hunger Free Oklahoma is an organization designed to unify state and federal agencies, non-profits and private businesses with a common goal of fighting food insecurity in our state. They facilitate collaboration among these entities to build programs that make nutritious food more accessible and affordable.

R. Comeau: We have a big team that does a lot of different things, so I get the joy of working with them on programs like our Double Up Oklahoma, programs like our SNAP hotline

initiative as well as our programs that help other organizations implement these big nutrition programs like SNAP Outreach, summer feeding, school breakfast. So I get to work with the entire team to make those things happen, which is just a super fun job.

J. Tyree: So what exactly is Double Up Oklahoma?

R. Comeau: Double Up Oklahoma is a nutrition incentive program. So what that means is when somebody shops at a Double Up-participating firm – so a store, farmers market – every dollar they spend in SNAP, they earn a dollar for free fresh fruits and vegetables up to \$20 a day. So it's a dollar-for-dollar incentive that happens when they check out.

J. Tyree: The program had already existed for a few years when Hunger Free Oklahoma took over its administration about two years ago. And then they really wanted to expand its access for Oklahomans, to make Double Up Oklahoma even more robust.

R. Comeau: At the time we took it over it was only in farmers markets, but then to really look at how we can strategically place the program in grocery stores, where they could have the maximum impact. And so thinking that between farmers markets and strategic grocery stores, we could really scale the program so that it reached as many people in need as possible. And the TSET funding came along right at the perfect time for that. So about a month before the TSET opportunity, we received a USDA grant to expand our project, so we were looking at that grocery store piece. Then COVID happened and there was an even bigger need. And so the TSET funding has really allowed us to pilot this project, work out all the kinks from getting it into farmers markets to grocery stores, and then really watch those grocery stores explode. The participation has just dramatically increased in the entire program overall, but even just within the grocery stores the past six months. We have seen such a strong increase in participation as customers get used to the program.

And what we've been able to see is just in the past six months alone, operating at only five stores, we've been able to provide over \$91,000 in incentives to people to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables. Our early estimates are looking at about 1,200 people per store per month participating, so that's 1,200 families who have access to more fresh fruits and vegetables than we would have seen in the past.

J. Tyree: That is a tremendous impact for such a short period of time and, as Richard mentioned, in the middle of a pandemic. Not only has this program increased fruit and vegetable consumption in our state, it's also given consumers an opportunity to try and enjoy more nutritious variety in their diets.

R. Comeau: So one of the interesting data points we've been able to see is obviously the really common produce items – bananas, apples oranges – those things have increased; the sales of those have increased. But what we've also seen is there has been a crazy increase in sort of more specialty items that grocery stores either didn't stock at all in the past or stocked a very limited selection of, such as asparagus, eggplants, specialty cut produce, berries; things that were a little bit higher value or a little bit more difficult to cook that families have been able to take a risk on and say, "You know what, I have a

little bit of extra money in these DUO bucks, let me try to cook that asparagus on the grill tonight, let me try and slice up that eggplant and throw it in a pan and see how it goes; let's buy the berries, we don't have to stress out about that extra dollar that they cost more compared to the apple." So we have just seen a dramatic increase in produce consumption or purchasing but also a much broader variety.

J. Tyree: Double Up Oklahoma still has room to grow across the state. Hunger Free Oklahoma has to prioritize the communities in most dire need right now, but has big plans to take the program statewide. And in the meantime, they're facilitating some other amazing initiatives to help food insecurity.

R. Comeau: Our primary focus has been rural with this current expansion with TSET and we have quite a few reasons for that. But one of them was that the geographical distance in rural Oklahoma is drastic and dramatic. We might see one grocery store per county in some of our worst-off counties in Oklahoma so we really focused our efforts on rural Oklahoma so far, although we're working on plans toward the future to be able to offer DUO in our cities as well.

There are lots of federal programs that have a huge impact on families' food insecurity and their ability to access enough nutritious food. One of the things we do broadly across the state is help cities, counties, schools, non-profits implement summer feeding programs. So summer meals are free meals eligible to all children ages 1-18, any kid can walk up and get a meal, there's no ID requirement. And so our base is just making sure there's enough of those sites to serve all the families; that's really where we start. But then there's also things, as we progress in that, we're also able to work with different partners to help them procure more nutritious food. So we like to meet people where they're at. It's really important for kids to have enough food and then once we get them enough food, let's start talking about the quality of that food and the variety of that food, let's connect them to vendors that can package and provide fruits and vegetables in innovative, interesting ways that kids will actually eat, and let's continue to ramp up the quality of those food offerings while focusing on our primary goal, which is enough food for every kid every day in Oklahoma. And we do those broadly – rural, urban, you know, across the state. This summer we are looking at somewhere between 1,000 and 1,300 sites offering those meals throughout the state, as far out as the panhandle.

If people are interested in learning more, they can go to www.meals4kidsok.org and find the site nearest them as well as additional information.

[8:06]

[Hopeful guitar music ("[Calm Reflections](#)" by SoundDesign)]

J. Tyree: Between Double Up Oklahoma, Meals For Kids and the other great work this agency is doing, Hunger Free Oklahoma and its partners are providing a necessary service that meets an urgent need and will leave a long-lasting impact for all Oklahomans.

R. Comeau: At the end of the day at Hunger Free Oklahoma, our goal is to get enough nutritious food in every family's hands in Oklahoma. You know, one in four kids in Oklahoma has been food-insecure, one in six families is food insecure, so to us, Double Up Oklahoma is a vehicle for helping people stretch their food dollar a little bit farther, but also procure more of those whole, nutritious foods that they need to live a healthy and sustainable life.

[9:04]

C. Howell: Hunger Free Oklahoma functions off of collaborative partnerships with businesses, government agencies and community members. One partner that's been instrumental in expanding the Double Up program is the Homeland Acquisition Corporation, or HAC, which is the parent company of several grocery stores, but mainly Homeland.

[9:24]

[Bouncy Disco music ("[London Dry](#)" by Monad)]

C. Howell: CEO Marc Jones joins us to discuss how they incorporated Double Up into their stores and some other efforts they've taken to improve the health of their customers.

Marc Jones: HAC is our corporate name; most people know us by Homeland. We operate 80 stores overall; 69 in Oklahoma, so most of our stores are Oklahoma. We also operate not only Homeland stores but United stores and also some Cash Savers; in Georgia we operate some Piggly Wiggly's and Food World. But most of our businesses here in Oklahoma and is Homeland stores, so a lot of people just call us Homeland, which is the H in the HAC.

J. Tyree: Marc Jones has been CEO of HAC for nearly five years, and during that time, he's become passionate about the company's mission and sought out ways to expand it.

M. Jones: Our mission is to be a company of Oklahomans feeding Oklahomans. It's not necessarily a mission to be Oklahomans selling groceries to Oklahomans, although that is a big part of what we do. But we're involved in our food banks, we're involved in our communities, we're involved in programs like Double Up Food Bucks for that reason, because we take it seriously and we're lucky because we're an employee-owned company. We don't have shareholders that are demanding a return on their investment that live in a far-off land. Our owners work in the stores, they have neighbors that have budgets that they need to meet and that have difficulty buying groceries. And they live in the communities and in addition to having a place to work, they want a thriving community. So we are lucky in that kind of our patience and focus on being a company of Oklahomans feeding Oklahomans is backed up by our 3,400 employee owners that feel the same way.

J. Tyree: So when the opportunity to participate in the Double Up program presented itself, HAC was happy to join. It hasn't always been easy, but it's worth the effort.

M. Jones: It really kind of evolved out of conversations, multiple conversations with the folks over at Hunger Free Oklahoma about would that be possible and us trying to figure out, quite

honestly, one of our biggest hurdles was within our IT systems of figuring out ways to process the rewards encouraging people to buy fresh produce. So it required probably a bunch of patience, not so much from our part as from Hunger Free Oklahoma to come to fruition, but it was well worth it.

One of our challenges with this program is not all of our customers are using EBT funds to purchase their groceries. So communicating a program that is only applicable to a certain portion of the people in your store, just means that you gotta be real clear on the communication, otherwise you're going to confuse people. But we hear from customers, I would say every day, in particular our produce employees hear from customers every day that this is enabling them to buy more fresh produce for their families. They are getting hugs and they are getting thank yous and for us that's probably the most rewarding thing, just to hear those personal stories.

The quantitative is that we are issuing a whole bunch of rewards, coupons, because the program is when you spend your EBT money in the store, you receive dollars that can be redeemed for fresh produce. And so we're issuing a lot of those rewards. But probably more important than quantitatively is that we are seeing a very good percentage of those being redeemed. So we are seeing customers saying, "Wow, thank you very much and I am going to do exactly what this program is designed to do. I am going to come back and I'm going to spend that money, those rewards dollars, on fresh produce to feed my family." So we're seeing redemption rates as high as 20 or 25 percent, which is phenomenal. That's the quantitative and that varies, and, you know, probably varies weekly from month to month but probably just as important is what we hear from customers, nothing but good things.

- J. Tyree: Those are some great ways to encourage consumers to live a little bit healthier. But unfortunately, some communities don't have enough access to even make those choices. Food deserts are a prevalent problem in Oklahoma, and those are defined as communities with low access to healthy foods.
- C. Howell: Some residents of rural communities have to travel long distances to get to the nearest grocery stores, and some urban communities lack reliable public transportation and nearby grocery options. So this directly affects a number of Oklahomans trying their best to care for their families. But some amazing partnerships are coming together with creative solutions and Marc was eager to discuss one example of this.
- M. Jones: Food deserts really is a description of lack of access to fresh and healthy foods. It can happen all across our state. In Oklahoma City, we're right in the middle of one, actually, where we're sitting in northeast Oklahoma City. We've got a couple of fun and exciting things going on actually in northeast Oklahoma City. We partnered with RestoreOKC to open a small Market at Eastpoint on northeast 23rd. It's a small 7,000-square-foot grocery store. We crammed as much fresh food as well as some package grocery in there to serve the community and encourage a lot of walk-up traffic. It's a really unique staffing model with a bunch of RestoreOKC staff paired with kind of our front-end systems and IT systems.

J. Tyree: Partnerships like this bring people together to discover and implement creative and sustainable solutions to meeting a definite demand for nutritious foods in low-access areas.

M. Jones: That is off to a great start and to the point of, “Is there a demand?” We say it’s a food desert; is it a food desert, sometimes people ask, because people don’t want to buy the fresh produce? And our answer is a resounding, “No, it’s not because there’s a lack of demand; there is a demand.” When we opened that store Market at Eastpoint, the percentage of sales of that small little store, and it’s small sales that is produce, probably is the highest percentage of any store we run. There is demand, what it takes is creativity to meet that need.

Our lesson through both of these store projects that we are working on, as well as what we see elsewhere across the state, is that it sometimes takes creativity, it sometimes takes, you know, on our side, figuring out how to make enough deliveries a week to stay fresh in produce and how to manage a small-volume store or a small space or an unconventional creative relationship with a non-profit or with the city or different groups, but the answers are out there. It just takes a little persistence and actually, much like our conversation at the start about partnering with Hunger Free Oklahoma, it just takes a little patience to make sure that you’ve got the persistence to see these things through, but the reward is huge.

[16:10]

[Groovy funk music (“[Kickflip](#)” by Fugu Vibes)]

C. Howell: We at TSET were so excited to hear about the Market at Eastpoint. It’s this exact kind of community collaboration that TSET encourages through our community-based incentive grants, food access grants and health systems initiatives. We decided to take a trip to check out the Market for ourselves, and Jonathan Veal, Director of Jobs with the non-profit RestoreOKC, sat down with us to talk us through how it all came together.

[16:41]

Jonathan Veal: My name is Jonathan Veal, and I am the director of jobs at RestoreOKC in the Northeast side of Oklahoma City.

I have been involved with RestoreOKC since around 2017. First on a volunteer basis. My church began to come to the second Saturday work days....From that first connection or exposure to RestoreOKC, I was just really blown away with the level of intentionality and folks in a one specific area in the hardest community to development, seeing communities thrive, hearing the mission, the vision, and then how it’s been executed.

C. Howell: RestoreOKC is an amazing organization. It’s a 501c3 dedicated to building up the northeast side of Oklahoma City by cultivating economic development, urban farming, affordable housing, and educational equity. Northeast Oklahoma City has a rich history of social and cultural influence in the state, but has faced systemic barriers to success for

generations. RestoreOKC works hard to resolve these longstanding inequities by prioritizing community feedback and involvement.

J. Veal: Before you can begin to try to change the community, you have to try to engage the individuals that are in the community, and so the best way you can do that is getting a chance to sit across the table and hearing their story and learn from them and hear what current strengths they have and help them talk through what kind of opportunities for growth they may need and then developing a plan for them to work on those things.

It's just important that you have the heart and the voice of your community and if you want buy-in from the community the purchasing power you want them at some level to have a feel that they have a voice in what's taking place. I think a lot of times businesses, they come in to communities such as these and they kind of say, "This is what you need." We take an inverted approach. We want to say, "Hey we're here to learn," and as we learn we want to come alongside you and partner with you to help change whatever hindrances or barriers there may be. Obviously food access and insecurity is a major issue on the eastside. We're just playing a small piece to make that not the case anymore.

C. Howell: The Northeast side of Oklahoma City has struggled with this issue for a long time, but when the pandemic hit, the situation became even more urgent. RestoreOKC worked with the local partnerships they'd formed to meet this need and hit the ground running when the community needed it most.

J. Veal: If we can go back to 2019, the last full service grocery store in this community closed down off 23rd and MLK. RestoreOKC from an organizational standpoint quickly mobilized with Councilwoman Nikki Nice and some other orgs in this community to be a food distribution location, but after we began to engage with some volunteers in our community, we really started listening to them and wanted to know, hey long-term what would you like to see? What can we do to be part of the solution and not just kind of talk about the problem? So we initially thought they were going to say hey, we want you guys to be a food distribution spot, but they said no, we want the dignity of buying power. We want the ability to be able to purchase. So from that on our campus, we have a storage building that's about 1200 square feet and so about 10-12 weeks, we were able to shape and create into a micro grocery store. So now we're around November 2019 and the OKC Thunder each year around the holidays, they pick a location where they can have their holiday giveaway, and for some reason they selected RestoreOKC. From that conversation and that event we were connected with Homeland because Homeland and the Oklahoma City Thunder are partners. The CEO from Homeland came and saw what we had done from changing our metal storage building to a small micro grocer and he just said, "Hey, what can I do to support you guys?" Because we're a community development organization and not a grocery store, we didn't have the purchasing power to connect with AWG to get a truck delivered here, so Homeland leveraged their relationships with AWG to let us purchase through them, but we'd have to pick it up from their closest Homeland, so we did that. During that time, we were only open Monday, Wednesday and Saturday with limited hours, and then fast-forward, that was going on for about three and half months, and then March 2020 the pandemic happened, so we were faced with the question of what's our response to this? The

community said if we could be open on a more regular basis that would be very very helpful. And so we went from being open three days a week, Monday, Wednesday and Saturday, to being open six days a week 10 am to 6pm Monday through Saturday, and the response from the community was tremendous.

The beauty of this market is it's a private-public partnership between RestoreOKC and Homeland. We hire Homeland to staff the store and assistant manager because Homeland is just tenured in that space, they bring an expertise. So RestoreOKC handles all the personnel. 85% of employees are from the community, so it's truly a community market. It's pretty cool to see what's been taking place in such a short amount of time.

C. Howell: Access to nutritional food can literally be a matter of life and death. Equitable access to healthy food is a critical factor in life expectancy, and the disparities are stark.

J. Veal: So there's an 18-year life expectancy discrepancy between those who live west of 235 and those who live east of 235. A lot of that is because access to healthy fruits and vegetables or those items that are immune boosting have been removed, so you'll see those Family Dollar or those Dollar Generals, those types of stores that are providing food, but is it healthy food, food that is building the immune system up? So one of the points of us in opening the market is providing that at some level. We have 32 feet allocated real estate to produce, not just any produce, it's a variety of produce. Those who come and walk into the market, it's clearly seen that there is some intentionality where there's a lot of variety, a lot of color, a lot of pop in that space in the market. We want them to know that we care and the quality is there.

We take the mindset of not looking for instant results but really taking a long game approach. Obviously the food insecurity in this community didn't happen overnight and it won't change overnight, so we understand we're in a marathon and not a sprint, so we're in it for the long haul, and so whatever necessary steps that we need to take as an organization directly or indirectly by partnering with other organizations to help and assist this community to thrive again, we want to do it.

[24:00]

[Feel-good funk music ("[Funky Fun](#)" by Material Music)]

C. Howell: RestoreOKC's vision of the Market at Eastpoint is so much more than just a grocery store. It incorporates every aspect of food production from farming, harvesting, selling, and even cooking. This is a truly holistic approach to healing and community-building.

J. Veal: We have 15 farm interns, and we think about changing behaviors it actually starts with the next generation, we are helping this generation understand the science of food from the planting, the cultivating, the harvesting of food, and now with the market they get to understand the entrepreneurial side of food from the selling of it in the market but also we have a café called the Eastside Eatery and they can learn the culinary aspect of food. It's just really tremendous to see what's taking place with one community market.

- C. Howell: It's this holistic mindset that's quintessential to the mission of RestoreOKC and the reason that this effort has such an immense impact. Jonathan says he couldn't be happier with what he's doing, and it's easy to see why.
- J. Veal: This is what gets me out of the bed in the morning to know that at some level I can have a positive impact on someone's today but also someone's tomorrow. It's exciting to me.
- Since we've opened the market, people have asked who is the market for? And my response has always been if you have a grocery need, the market is there for you, so please come visit the market. We're open seven days a week, Monday through Saturday 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. and then on Sundays 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. So if you have a need, come by and see us.
- [25:51]**
- J. Tyree: What a great interview, Cate. And I had the pleasure of meeting Jonathan, too, and seeing the market for myself to take photos. It's absolutely wonderful. Between HAC, Hunger Free Oklahoma Restore OKC, and other civic-minded businesses, non-profits and individuals throughout our state, amazing things are happening in terms of increasing access to healthy food and nutrition.
- C. Howell: Absolutely. Food deserts are such a prevalent problem in Oklahoma, but luckily, there are some resources available for you if your community is lacks equitable food access. The first thing is to become aware of your community's nutritional status. This is as simple as taking stock of what grocery stores are close by and what healthy food options they have. Is there a produce section, and if so, are the fruits and vegetables good quality? Are there any full-service grocers? If you determine there aren't sufficient healthy options for your community, there are some things you can do.
- J. Tyree: One is checking to see if there's a TSET Healthy Living Program coordinator in your county. A list of them is found tset.ok.gov, exploring our healthy lifestyle grants and checking out our current grantees. HLP coordinators are dedicated to improving their communities and would be happy to work with you and guide you through the process.
- C. Howell: It's also great to talk to dollar store and convenient store owners and request that they stock healthy produce. Many would be interested in adding healthy options if there is a demand for it. You can also talk to your local chamber of commerce and discuss what it would take to recruit a full-service grocer to the area. Your chamber of commerce can unite local organizations and work with the city government to create a strategy to bring a business into the community.
- J. Tyree: Another great resource for healthy produce is your local farmers market. Shape Your Future has a farmers market locator on its website, along with helpful tips and recipes – very tasty recipes at that – and it's all available at shapeyourfutureok.com.
- C. Howell: As always, we hope this episode was interesting and helpful to you. You can check out those photos of the Market at Eastpoint on our Facebook page [@OklahomaTSET](https://www.facebook.com/OklahomaTSET), and if

you want even more Better Health content, you can find all of our episodes and full transcripts at tset.ok.gov/podcast.

J. Tyree: Once again, thank you for joining us and tuning in, and until next time, this is James Tyree –

C. Howell: And Cate Howell –

J. Tyree: Wishing you peace –

C. Howell: – and Better Health.

[Theme music]

[28:52]