



What is Policy? *A Fact Sheet*

Grantees of the TSET Healthy Living Program will be working with several sectors – such as businesses, cities and governments, community institutions and organizations, and schools – to prevent and reduce tobacco use and obesity across Oklahoma. The focus of this work is on making and enhancing policy to create healthier environments. This fact sheet provides a shared definition of policy that applies across the TSET Healthy Living Program areas. It also provides a rationale for using policy as a mechanism for sustaining change.

Defining Policy

When people hear the word “policy,” they often think of an ordinance passed by a city council or a law enacted by a state legislature. However, both public institutions and private entities make policies. Contracts, organizational agreements, and agency regulations are also policies. For example, one Oklahoma state law – a policy made by the state legislature – prohibits smoking in most enclosed public places and indoor workplaces. However, the law contains several exceptions that allow indoor smoking in places such as stand-alone bars. The owner of a stand-alone bar may choose to adopt a smoke-free policy that bans smoking inside the business.*

In the example above, the state law is a **public policy** that applies to most enclosed public places and indoor workplaces. The state adopted the law and enforces it on behalf of the people of Oklahoma. A policy a stand-alone bar owner adopts and enforces that affects only his/her business and patrons is a **voluntary policy**. Whether public or voluntary, a policy is ideally 1) a written statement that reflects the values and decisions of a public body or private organization; 2) binding and enforceable; and 3) broadly applicable to a geographic area, type of institution or physical space, and/or group of people. Policies in the TSET Healthy Living Program Outcomes Toolbox meet these criteria. They are research-based and tailored to each sector.

WHAT IS AND WHAT IS NOT POLICY?

NOT POLICY

A local government creates a program that offers incentives to convenience stores that voluntarily sell fruits and vegetables.

A business puts up signs encouraging employees to walk more.

A school provides information about the harms of smoking to students in its health class curriculum.

POLICY

A city council adopts an action-oriented resolution committing financial and/or technical assistance to all convenience stores in the community that sell fruits and vegetables.

A business writes a policy that provides up to two hours per week of paid time for employees to exercise.

The school board adopts a policy requiring all school campuses, including indoor and outdoor areas, to be tobacco free - 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Often, non-policy strategies support the implementation of policy. Businesses, cities and governments, community institutions and organizations, and schools currently pursuing non-policy strategies should look for opportunities to achieve their goals through policy.

*Oklahoma state law prohibits smoking tobacco products in most indoor workplaces, but the law contains several exemptions that allow smoking in limited places. Private entities, such as businesses, community organizations, and bars, are free to completely prohibit smoking on property they own or operate. These voluntary policies can also prohibit the use of e-cigarettes and vapor products, which are not regulated by state law.

Why Policy?

Policy is a tool used to document decisions and change physical environments, community norms, and the way organizations and systems operate. Policy has the potential to affect people's decisions and behaviors across a large population. Although policy is just one tool used to improve health outcomes, **it is the most important tool** because it sustains change and often achieves broad results more efficiently at a lower cost than individual or group education and clinical approaches.

For example, public awareness campaigns have positively affected people's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors around the use of child safety seats. Correctly using child safety seats reduces children's risk of injury and death in car crashes. Public education programs and safety seat distribution increase long-term child safety seat use by an average of 6 percent. However, laws that require children to be restrained in safety seats while riding in a vehicle increase child safety seat use by an average of 13 percent.¹ Tobacco control policies and programs have a similar relationship. On their own, school programs that educate students about the harms of smoking are relatively ineffective at reducing smoking prevalence. They may contribute to declines in smoking rates when combined with community-wide policies that restrict access to tobacco products. By comparison, comprehensive smoke-free indoor air laws may reduce smoking rates by 11 percent. Furthermore, public education campaigns about the dangers of smoking may enhance the impact of tobacco control policies.²

Policy in Action in Oklahoma

BUSINESSES: Jackson County Memorial Hospital (JCMH), Workplace Wellness Policy

Recognizing that a healthy workforce is a productive workforce, JCMH adopted a formal wellness policy in 2014. The policy addresses nutrition, physical activity, and tobacco, and it includes specific health-promoting provisions. The policy requires healthy foods and beverages to be served at company-sponsored meetings and events; provides bike racks for employees; and prohibits the use of tobacco products, including vapor products, on JCMH property.

CITIES & GOVERNMENTS: Tulsa, Complete Streets Resolution

Many cities were built to prioritize cars and traffic flow. This has discouraged walking, biking, and other forms of transportation that promote health. In 2012, Tulsa, Oklahoma, passed an action-oriented Complete Streets resolution. The resolution states that future street projects should be planned, designed, and operated, when possible, to accommodate all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, drivers, and public transit riders. The city also created a Complete Streets Procedural Manual. This resource provides guidance on designing and planning Complete Streets as well as best practice guidelines for city departments, design professionals, private developers, and community groups.

COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS & ORGANIZATIONS: Crosstimbers Early Learning Center, Child Care Wellness Policy

Childhood obesity is linked to shorter lifespans and a host of chronic diseases. Crosstimbers Early Learning Center has designed their child care wellness policy to provide children with a tobacco-free environment that supports healthy eating and an active lifestyle. As a result of the policy, families and staff have made adjustments, including providing healthy foods for birthdays and incorporating one hour of physical activity into the school day.

SCHOOLS: Oklahoma School Districts, Tobacco-Free Schools Policies

Use of e-cigarettes and vapor products by youth has skyrocketed in recent years. State law requires schools to be tobacco free at all times, but it does not address e-cigarettes and vapor products. School districts across Oklahoma have gone beyond the requirements of state law by prohibiting the use of e-cigarettes and vapor products through their tobacco-free policies. In 2002, Millwood Public School District became one of the first to adopt a tobacco-free policy that included e-cigarettes and vapor products. Today, 238 public school districts in Oklahoma have 24/7 tobacco-free policies that include e-cigarettes and vapor products.

1. Zaza S, Sleet D, Thompson R, Sosin D, Bolen J. Reviews of Evidence Regarding Interventions to Increase Use of Child Safety Seats. *Am J Prev Med.* 2001;21(4S). <http://thecommunityguide.org/mvoi/mvoi-AJPM-evrev-child-safety-seat.pdf>.
2. Levy DT, Chaloupka F, Gitchell J. The Effects of Tobacco Control Policies on Smoking Rates. *J Public Heal Manag Pract.* 2004;10(4):338-353. doi:10.1097/00124784-200407000-00011.