



Commentary: Tennessee PSAs Underplay COVID Crisis

By **Mark Harmon** - November 30, 2020

Public Service Announcements (PSAs) have a long and noble history on U.S. television. Smokey the Bear taught campers to extinguish fully their campfires. In one famous “Keep America Beautiful” PSA the audience sees a character in Native American costume paddling a canoe across a polluted landscape. As litter is tossed on his moccasins we switch to a close-up of a single tear on his cheek. PSAs have nudged us toward meritorious acts ranging from voting to donating blood to charitable giving.

That’s why it’s particularly alarming the state of Tennessee is distributing PSAs related to COVID-19 that offer mixed, weak, and sometimes counterproductive messages about preventing spread of the virus. The announcements have played on stations across our state and may be found on a state website, PSA Toolkit, [PSA Toolkit](#).

The thirty-second video “Choices” has some disturbing elements. As we see a masked young couple strolling outside the Orpheum Theatre in Memphis, a voice-over announcer tells us, “We Tennesseans all have a choice to make in our fight against COVID-19.” The young man in the couple says, “I choose to enjoy live music.” We switch to outside Neyland Stadium where a masked young man wearing UT colors and logos tells us, “I choose to cheer on my team.” Behind him three young people, masked but not socially distant, are having an animated conversation.



Tennessee Public Service Announcement “Choices” (Photo: Tennessee.gov)

A masked young woman is then shown in a restaurant. She shrugs and says, “I choose to go out.” Two diners behind her are unmasked and eating. A trio of young women to one side are seated and masked, and appear to be awaiting their in-house meal. Then a muscled and masked young man is shown in a gym or health club. He puts his hands on his hips and says, “I choose to stay healthy.”



The most disturbing sequence that follows is a young woman entering a family kitchen and removing her mask. She then holds that mask in her hands as a multi-generational family meal with seven unmasked participants is underway, crowded together around one table. She declares, "I choose to celebrate with my family."

The narrator steps in to tell us, "The choice is simple. Choose to live your life. And choose to live responsibly. Face it. Masks fight COVID-19." His words are accompanied by the masked UT fans taking a selfie, the fitness buff working out, and the other characters from the PSA donning masks. It concluded with four masked young women out on the town in front of a music joint.

The entire PSA seems to mirror Gov. Bill Lee's intransigent and foolish pandemic policies: stress keeping businesses open, and encourage voluntary steps but not mask or other mandates.

As I write this column, some 363,466 Tennesseans have been diagnosed with COVID-19, with effects ranging from brief and mild to severe and long term; 4,541 have died. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention pleaded with the public not to travel or assemble in large groups for Thanksgiving, and to stay at least six feet away from others who do not live with you. Tennessee's PSA seems to be nudging in the opposite direction about holidays, taking a nonchalant "live your life, just voluntarily wear a mask" attitude.

In fact, the entire PSA seems to mirror Gov. Bill Lee's intransigent and foolish pandemic policies: stress keeping businesses open, and encourage voluntary steps but not mask or other mandates. In late July, Dr. Deborah Birx, coordinator of the White House coronavirus task force came to our state and recommended shutting down bars and limiting indoor dining. As Justine Coleman wrote for *The Hill*, "Shortly after Birx spoke, Lee said he would not close bars, limit indoor dining or give county officials the authority to do so. Only a few areas are able to close businesses without the governor's approval."

Tennessee's PSA Toolkit has a marginally better video called "Never Miss a Moment" which features an elderly farmer talking about why he wears a mask. Let's hope our local TV stations opt for that one. Good public health policy and good health messaging must go hand in hand. Unfortunately, currently Tennessee has neither.

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