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## The Impact of USU Extension on Building Vibrant Communities

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## **The Impact of USU Extension on Building Vibrant Communities**

*Outcomes and Impact Quarterly: Special Edition*

Lead Contact: Heidi LeBlanc

### **Primary Critical Issue: Community Resilience**

Utah consists of many rural counties spread out over vast areas of land, and only a few urban counties in centralized locations. As a result, there is an increasing disparity in economic opportunities for residents in rural counties. The majority of current and new jobs are located along the urban counties in the Wasatch Front, including jobs in the growing technology sector in Utah's "Silicon Slopes." In contrast, rural residents struggle to find well-paying and stable work in their own communities and are often faced with the decision to relocate to urban centers. This exacerbates the problem of economic depression in rural counties since rural-urban migration leads to low productivity in these counties. There is a need to support rural communities through community and capacity-building initiatives.

Therefore, the aim of the Vibrant Communities program at Utah State University (USU) Extension is to strengthen communities across Utah through facilitated community-focused coalitions and partnerships, entrepreneurship education, and strategic initiatives to facilitate economic and social well-being. The desired long-term outcomes of the Vibrant Communities program are to (a) connect rural communities to economic opportunities in urban centers through innovative workplace practices (e.g., remote working arrangements), and (b) facilitate educational interventions, and community partnerships and coalitions to reduce substance abuse disorders in rural counties.

### **Suicide Prevention Training for Workers**

*USU Extension Faculty Contact: Emma Parkhurst*

According to the CDC, suicide among the U.S. working-age population (16-64) is trending upwards. In 2017, approximately 38,000 persons died by suicide. Suicide was selected by community partners and leaders as the top health issue in Davis County Utah for the second time; first in 2013 and again in 2018. Suicide is viewed as one of the most serious and urgent health issues in the nation. In response, USU Extension facilitated VitalCog to educate and equip businesses with the capacity to address mental health and suicide concerns in the workplace. VitalCog is one of seven evidence-based suicide programs offered to the community of Davis County. The objectives of the 2-hour VitalCog training are to (a) increase awareness of suicide prevention; (b) increase capacity for dialogue and critical thinking about workplace mental health challenges, and; (c) increase organizations' ability to promote help-seeking and help-giving in the workplace.

A total of 10 virtual training sessions were conducted with 87 participants. An evaluation pre-survey was implemented before the training with a response rate of 95% ( $n = 83$ ). Most participants were male (53%), with 47% reporting being female. Individual agencies and/or employees that completed the training include, but are not limited to, Davis School District,

Layton City, Centuri Construction Group, and Children's Service Society of Utah. An evaluation post-survey implemented after the training had a response rate of 31% ( $n = 27$ ). Short-term evaluation results indicated that attendees had an increase in knowledge related to suicide and suicide prevention in the workplace following the training (89%). In addition, most participants reported an improved level of confidence about talking to someone about getting help following the training (92%). Participants agreed they would be able to apply the information they learned in their place of work (88%): one of the most commonly reported concepts learned was to be direct when asking about suicide. Participants also shared their experiences with the training: one said, "I learned the most about how to start the conversation with someone who you think might be thinking of suicide." Another stated they learned about "the potential signs to be aware of for a suicidal person." Lastly, a participant was made aware of the "focus it brings to mental health and how important it is not only in the workplace but in personal life."

Evaluation results indicate an increase in employees' knowledge about suicide prevention in the workplace and confidence in talking to someone about getting help. Results also show that the VitalCog training provided employees with practical applications for suicide prevention. The positive outcomes of this training demonstrate a significant step towards reducing suicide rates within the county among the working population. USU Extension will continue the partnership with Davis Behavioral Health to target individual cities participating in Communities That Care (CTC) coalitions and construction companies within Davis County.

### **Certified Remote Work Professional Course**

*USU Extension Faculty Contact: Paul Hill*

Utah's economy experienced steady growth in recent years. However, this prosperity is not evenly distributed. In rural counties, the unemployment rate has been as high as 10%, and in most communities, the unemployment rate has more than doubled the state unemployment average of 3%. Far commutes, access to job opportunities, and automation are employment challenges facing residents in rural Utah communities. Recent challenges such as COVID-19 also impacted employment opportunities in rural communities. The Remote Online Initiative (ROI) program was a legislative response to increasing unemployment, intergenerational poverty, and net migration of younger populations to urban centers. The ROI program of USU Extension created the Certified Remote Work Professional (CRWP) course to provide Utah's rural workforce with education and training for online opportunities in remote employment.

In 2022, the CRWP's annual evaluation results ( $n = 101$ ) showed that 35% of the sample found remote work, total salaries for those who found remote work increased by 73%, and 69% believed their median salaries would likely increase by 20% over the next year. With remote work, commutes to a physical workplace decreased by 62%. This resulted in an 83% total reduction in the number of miles driven by all participants who found remote work. The reduction in total miles driven equated to fuel savings of \$81 for all participants who found remote work. The reduction in the total number of miles driven was equivalent to a total reduction of 0.18 metric tons of carbon emissions. The ROI is making major progress to reduce rural unemployment by creating opportunities and implementing programs to enhance rural competitiveness and promote economic development across Utah.