



HEART Initiative

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extension.usu.edu/heart



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Special thanks to those not pictured, including USU Extension interns, staff, and faculty involved in substance use prevention efforts across the state!

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The Opioid Overdose Epidemic in Utah

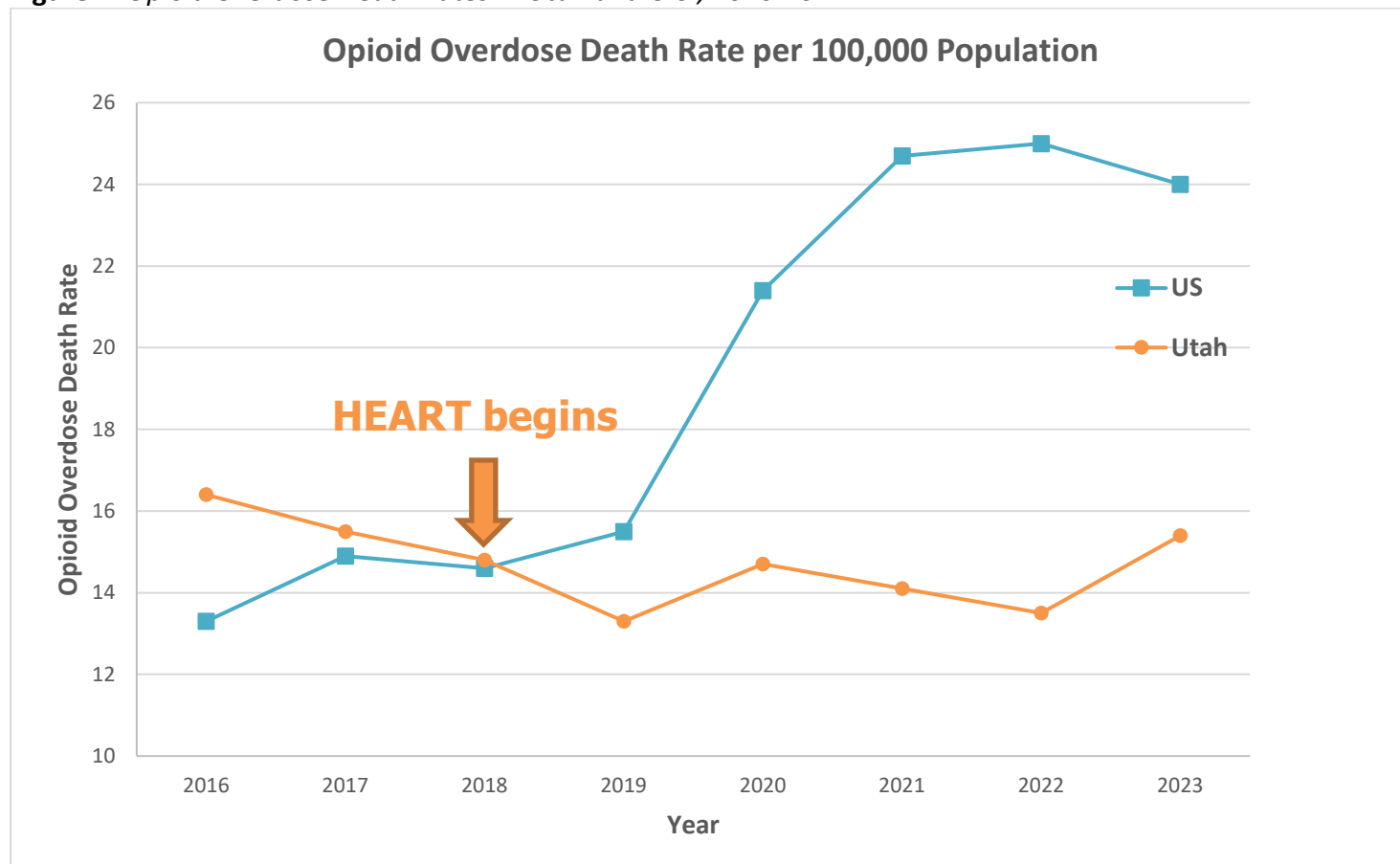
In 2017, the state of Utah was ranked third in the nation for prescription opioid- involved deaths ([Scholl et al., 2018](#)). Utah State University (USU) Extension's HEART Initiative was formed in 2018 to address the state's health and wellness needs, primarily the opioid overdose crisis ([Yaugher et al., 2020](#)). This was a dire need due to the overdose death rate for all drugs in Utah increasing from 19.5 per 100,000 in 2011 to of 22.4 in 2016 ([SHADAC, 2024](#)). The detrimental impacts of the opioid overdose epidemic require the prioritization and direction of resources to address the problem in each community.

Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([National Center for Health Statistics, 2024](#)) indicate that **collaborative efforts are having positive effects in the state**, but there is still work to be done. Since HEART began in 2018, overdose death rates for opioids have leveled off, while rates for the United States continue to rise (Figure 1). However, current data indicate that **10 Utahns die each week due to overdose**, of which seven are attributed to opioids ([Public Health Indicator Based Information System, n.d.](#)). While progress has been made, the influx of fentanyl, an extremely powerful opioid, is projected to increase the risk of overdose death. The HEART Initiative will continue to provide programming across the state to address this critical issue.

"The latest data show that our efforts are working, and as a result, there were 16,000 fewer overdose deaths over the last year. Every life saved means one less grieving family and community."

- Dr. Rahul Gupta,
Director, White House
Office of National Drug
Control, 2024

Figure 1. Opioid Overdose Death Rates in Utah and U.S., 2016-2022



Source: [SHADAC, 2024](#)

What Is the HEART Initiative?

In July 2018, USU Extension implemented a cutting-edge program with a multidisciplinary, five-faculty team focused on health and wellness to specifically address the opioid overdose epidemic in counties with high need.

Due to early successes, in late 2021, the HEART Initiative expanded to include all interested faculty at USU Extension to recognize their substance use prevention efforts and bolster positive impacts across the state. Currently, five core HEART faculty continue to serve as experts to help direct the initiative and support USU Extension faculty working with their communities to address substance use needs.

What Do We Do?

HEART brings unique evidence-based academic resources into the community, partnering locally and nationally to address the opioid overdose epidemic and other pressing public health issues. Additionally, HEART focuses on related health and wellness topics, including suicide prevention, substance use prevention, mental and emotional health education, stigma reduction, resilience building, and other topics, depending on identified local needs. HEART partners with health departments, research experts, community coalitions, and other key stakeholders to coordinate on-the-ground efforts that advance evidence-based information, community-based solutions, and multi-sector partnerships.

Over Seven Years of Successful Programming

Over seven years, HEART has secured over \$14 million in grant funding through key efforts and collaboration. In 2024 alone, HEART received six grants, bringing \$3,381,774 in funds throughout the state for programming in communities with high need. HEART worked with over 800 partners in 2024 on many impactful efforts, including local coalitions, A Light to Remember/International Overdose Awareness Day remembrance luminary ceremonies, Be Epic, Escape the Vape, Peer Support Specialist training, overdose prevention programming, and many more.



Tim Keady, Cache County HEART faculty, and student intern, Jessica George, support the re-opening of the Recovery Café in Logan, UT, November 2024.

"I am so impressed with the investment that our local organizations make in the coalition and I think it makes us so much stronger in our recovery support. Though we be small, we are mighty!!"

- Carbon and Emery Opioid and Substance Use Coalition member



Sadie Wilde, Aaron Hunt, and Julie Herrick provide information at the USU Extension Day on the Hill, February 2024.

HEART'S Four Objectives



Prevention and Education



- Support education in schools in partnership with evidence-based programming.
- Collaborate on suicide prevention and education.

- Support drug take-back and safe use of prescription medication programs.
- Example: Be Epic, Escape the Vape program



Stigma and Harm Reduction



- Collect storytelling and narratives from persons in recovery, individuals actively using substances, and family members to change views on stereotypes and reduce stigma.
- Provide education to individuals, groups, the public, and key stakeholders. Support suicide prevention, education, and coping strategies related to opioid and substance use.
- Provide education, information, and harm reduction skills to communities (e.g., supporting naloxone [Narcan®] use and awareness, etc.).

- Provide stigma and harm reduction education for first responders to improve their ability to provide care to people with substance use and mental health disorders.
- Train Certified Peer Support Specialists with lived experience to assist people with substance use disorders.
- Examples: bi-annual Prescription Take-Back Day events; naloxone trainings; neonatal abstinence syndrome awareness community events



Strengthening Community Ties

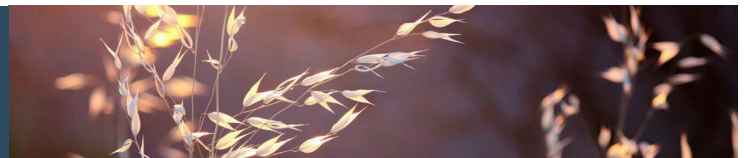


- Connect, establish, and support coalition partnerships.
- Engage key stakeholders and community collaborators to ensure the community voice guides all HEART outputs and projects.

- Employ service mapping to address gaps in service provision and foster community accessibility.
- Examples: Carbon and Emery Opioid and Substance Use Coalition; Tooele Opioid Response Network; Box Elder Safe Community Coalition



Resilience Building



- Partner to build emotional and physical resilience through strength-based programming, engendering a greater capacity to deal with struggles.
- Promote and strengthen resilience through evidence-based practice.

- Examples: Living Well self-management programs; PEACE (Pain Education and Community Empathy) education and support groups

Statewide Program Highlights

Overdose Response Training for High-Risk Groups

Aaron Hunt, Ph.D., and Gabriela Murza, in collaboration with other HEART faculty and staff, developed an innovative opioid overdose response training for service industry employees in eight high-risk Utah counties. This training educates participants on identifying the signs and symptoms of opioid overdose and the steps to respond using naloxone, an overdose reversal medication. In addition, the training covers Utah's Good Samaritan Law and available substance use treatment and recovery resources. Each participant completing the training is eligible to receive two doses of naloxone, and businesses can receive an overdose response kit to ensure their ability to effectively respond to overdoses and save lives.



Participants attend an overdose response training for service industry workers at Eagle Point Ski Resort, Beaver County, UT.

"I was surprised to find out that overdose is now the #1 cause of death for construction workers and now understand how important it is to know how to use Narcan."

-Training participant

In January 2024, the program expanded to include blue collar industries, such as construction and mining, where injury-related opioid prescriptions heighten overdose risks. We also expanded training for college students working to address the increasing danger of counterfeit pills laced with fentanyl. By targeting rural and urban communities, the program reduces stigma around substance use, promotes recovery, and provides high-risk groups with life-saving tools and knowledge. This collaborative effort strengthens Utah's response to the opioid crisis and creates safer workplace environments statewide.

This pilot program laid the foundation for securing additional funding to expand efforts through the TriCounty Overdose Prevention Program (TOPP). Funded by a \$350,000 three-year grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, this program will provide outreach and training to blue collar workers and the underserved Tribal and Hispanic populations in the region, furthering our ability to reduce overdose deaths.

Key Impacts

- 39 [trainings](#) completed.
- 1,030 participants.
- 784 Narcan kits distributed.
- 68 overdose response kits provided to businesses.
- 95% of participants reported understanding how to administer Narcan.
- 89% of participants understood that multiple Narcan doses can be provided to a person in need.

NARCAN SAVES LIVES



Learn how to reverse
an opioid overdose.



Salt Lake and Tooele County Programming

Salt Lake and Tooele counties HEART faculty and staff, led by Matt Huntington, have been working hard to expand innovative programming to address the needs in these counties.

Tooele County Jail Exit Preparation Program

One of the populations most at risk for overdose are those who are leaving incarceration. In 2020, USU Extension began programming to support individuals leaving incarceration; the programming began with naloxone training and alternative pain management classes. Over time, USU Extension was able to contract Certified Peer Support Specialists to provide services in the jail, which led to the development of the Exit Strategies class. Attendees of Exit Strategies gain critical knowledge about harm reduction, managing expectations, setting goals, creating their own exit strategy (community reintegration), and connecting to referral resources. The final component of providing care to individuals in incarceration was to ensure proper medication for opioid use (MOUD) and expanded behavioral health treatment options. USU supported this effort by creating the Exit Strategies curriculum, contracting peer support services, developing a jail-based MOUD protocol, and bringing in a group therapy treatment program.



Matt Huntington leads a panel at the Human Services Summit to discuss the innovative Jail Exit Preparation Program.

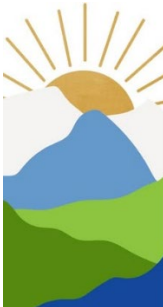
As of 2025, the Tooele County Sheriff's Office agreed to hire a USU employee as the jail supervisor over the substance use treatment program to ensure patients have access to MOUD, non-medication treatment, education, and connection to social services referrals outside of incarceration.

Certified and Family Peer Support Specialist Certification Training

[Family Peer Support Specialist \(FPSS\) training](#) is a critical piece of the behavioral health system. A FPSS is someone who uses their lived experience caring for a child or adolescent with a behavioral health disorder to help others in similar situations. The unique advantage of a FPSS is that they know first-hand the emotional needs of families, available resources, and effective strategies. When working with families, a FPSS does not do the work for them, rather, they provide mentorship, build skills, set youth and family-based goals, educate, and provide hope through empathy. Currently, USU Extension Salt Lake County is the only approved trainer for individuals to receive their FPSS certification. USU's Alicia Wilcox is the FPSS expert and has led USU Extension to develop the *FPSS Training Manual* and certify dozens of FPSS. Additionally, USU Extension received funding to support recently certified FPSS with experiential trainings as interns and apprentices. FPSS enrolled in this program are serving families at over 30 sites across the state. The FPSS program continues to grow, and in 2025, USU Extension expects to have the FPSS curriculum translated into Spanish and expand this needed service to Spanish-speaking communities.

Tooele Community Re-Entry Resource Fair

The Tooele County Re-entry Resource Fair is a program that began in 2023 as a bridge approach for individuals leaving the jail to re-enter the community. The re-entry fairs are open to the entire community and offer education and resources related to healthcare, behavioral health treatment, legal issues, screenings, and other social services. Although the program was slow to start, it found a permanent home within the Switchpoint Harris Community Village homeless shelter and is held monthly. One of the great successes of the re-entry fair is to see individuals who accessed the jail-based programs attend and receive assistance.



Tooele County Re-entry Resource Fair

PROVIDING COMMUNITY MEMBERS WITH LOCAL RESOURCES FOR:

- Employment
- Treatment
- Physical and mental healthcare
- Naloxone access
- Adult education
- COVID-19 education and take-home tests
- HIV & Hep C testing
- Programs related to maintaining positive interpersonal relationships & community connection

First Wednesday, Every Month
2:00 PM to 4:00 PM

Harris Village AUDITORIUM
251 North First Street
Tooele UT, 84074



Be Epic, Escape the Vape

2023–2024 marked the fourth year of the Be Epic, Escape the Vape e-cigarette prevention program for youth in rural communities in Southeast Utah. Be Epic was designed to help reduce tobacco use and prevent vaping initiation among youth in rural Southeast Utah, specifically Carbon, Emery, and Grand counties, which have elevated levels of youth e-cigarette use. Using a multicomponent intervention approach, Be Epic provides parent, teacher, and youth vape prevention education and a social media campaign focused on debunking myths surrounding e-cigarette use. The objective of each of these components is to decrease risk factors and increase protective factors in youth to prevent initial use of e-cigarette products. Learn more at [Be Epic, Escape the Vape](#).



In 2024, Be Epic, Escape the Vape:

- Reached 18 youth in afterschool programming.
- Reached 49 parents and caregivers at events.
- Supported 20 prevention events.
- Provided 29 teachers and school staff CATCH My Breath curriculum trainings.
- Provided 135 teachers and staff refresher emails for vape prevention.
- Reached 48,137 people through social media outreach.

A Light to Remember: International Overdose Awareness Day

Several USU Extension offices supported events on August 31 to recognize people lost to overdose. Events were held at nine locations and included education, harm reduction, treatment, and recovery resources. The events ended at 9 p.m. with a shared moment of silence and luminary display to remember those lost to overdose. Through multiple community partnerships, there were hundreds of people in attendance and lives impacted by luminary remembrance celebrations for those lost to overdose. In addition, naloxone trainings for temporary emergency overdose reversal occurred, resources were available, and communities came together for support. Learn more at [A Light to Remember](#).

"I Loved having the Narcan training, it saves lives, and I saved the life of a friend...you saved my life."
- A Light to Remember participant

Highlights of the events:

- Nine communities participated.
- 1,300+ people attended.
- 136 people were trained in overdose response.
- 264 naloxone kits were distributed.
- 49 Remember-at-Home Kits were mailed to households throughout Utah and beyond.
- Partners offered information about treatment, recovery, and support services to all attendees.



Volunteers distributed luminaries to honor loved ones lost to overdose at A Light to Remember.

HEART'S Online Presence

Social Media

HEART shares news, upcoming events, happenings in the community, and helpful health and wellness information related to the HEART team via Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. These social media pages were created at the end of March 2019, and HEART maintains a strong presence on each platform. A YouTube playlist was added in 2021, which features “HEART Bunch” videos and other educational content about various HEART-related topics. Through these platforms, we hope to engage with the community in a positive way and contribute helpful HEART insights and resources.

	TWITTER USUHeart @usuHEART		INSTAGRAM USU Extension HEART @usuextension_heart
	FACEBOOK USU Extension – HEART @usuHEART		YOUTUBE USU HEART@USUHEART

METRICS	INSTAGRAM	FACEBOOK
Reach	1,300	68,516
New page likes	89	121
Post engagements	3,970	1,557
Total	5,399	70,194



Scan here to watch a Heart Bunch YouTube video.

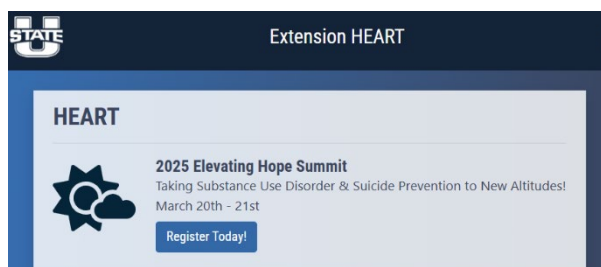
Heart Beat Newsletter

The monthly *HEART Beat* newsletter promotes health and wellness, focusing on the opioid overdose epidemic and emphasizes community awareness of resources, events, and emerging issues. Visit [The Heart Beat newsletter](#) or scan the QR code below to subscribe!



Website

The HEART website provides resources and information to the communities in which we serve. The website includes relevant information that promotes health and wellness and shares the impacts of the HEART initiative, news, upcoming events, community engagement opportunities, current research, and additional resources supporting the opioid overdose epidemic and other pressing public health issues. Learn more at the [USU Extension HEART website](#).



2023 Quick Facts



66

Total publications
authored



26

Scholarly
presentations offered



16

Total awards
received



\$3,381,774

In grant funding
acquired



800

Collaborative
partners



99

Virtual
lessons
taught



341

In-person
lessons
taught



634

Virtual
participants
reached



5,988

In-person
participants
reached



2,343

Naloxone
kits
distributed



50

Certified Family and
Peer Support Specialists
internships completed

Note: The accomplishments and totals listed are conservative numbers reflected by the seven HEART Initiative faculty who contributed data to this reporting period. The impacts of the expanded HEART Initiative continue to grow and will be reflected throughout Utah in the communities served.

References

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- Public Health Indicator Based Information System (IBIS). (n.d.). *Health indicator report: Drug overdose and poisoning incidents*. Utah Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved June 4, 2025, from <https://ibis.utah.gov/ibisph-view/indicator/view/PoiDth.LCD.html>
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