



Extension
Utah State University



HEALTH EXTENSION
Advocacy. Research. Teaching.

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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What Is the HEART Initiative?

Utah State University (USU) Extension launched the Health Extension: Advocacy, Research, and Teaching (HEART) Initiative in July 2018 to address Utah's growing opioid overdose epidemic and related behavioral health challenges. Initially a multidisciplinary five-faculty pilot, HEART rapidly evolved into a statewide Extension platform delivering evidence-based prevention, education, and community-driven solutions in high-need communities.

Following early successes and growing statewide demand, the HEART Initiative expanded in 2021 to include all interested USU Extension faculty engaged in substance use prevention, mental health education, and community wellness programming. Today, HEART's core faculty provides leadership and technical expertise while supporting Extension professionals and community partners working to improve health outcomes across Utah's rural and underserved communities.

While rooted in overdose prevention, HEART now addresses broad behavioral health, resilience, and community well-being priorities across the state.

Core programming areas include:

- Substance use and overdose prevention.
- Suicide prevention and mental health education.
- Stigma reduction and harm reduction strategies.
- Youth and family prevention initiatives.
- Workforce development and peer support training.
- Community resilience and well-being programs.

What Do We Do?

HEART translates university research into practical, community-based action. Through collaborative partnerships with local health departments, community coalitions, healthcare providers, educators, and national organizations, HEART delivers prevention-focused programming that addresses substance use, mental health, and broader public health priorities. By combining Extension outreach with academic expertise, HEART strengthens local capacity to implement evidence-based solutions that respond to each community's unique needs.

HEART's Four Pillars

A Statewide Model for Community Impact

HEART programming is based on four pillars:

- (1) Prevention and education,
- (2) Stigma reduction and harm reduction,
- (3) Strengthening community ties and workforce development, and
- (4) Resilience and community well-being.

The following section further details these pillars and the positive impacts of HEART's programming.

Key Programs and Statewide Impact Highlights

Across reporting faculty, HEART programs were delivered **573 times** (31 virtually and 542 in person), reaching more than **8,100 participants** statewide. Together, these efforts demonstrate HEART's transition from a programmatic initiative to a statewide prevention and workforce development model. Programs reflected all four HEART pillars and demonstrated strong collaboration with community partners, coalitions, and behavioral health systems.



Prevention and Education



HEART collaborates with schools, community organizations, and coalitions to deliver prevention-focused education for youth and families that reduces risk factors and strengthens protective behaviors.

- Be Epic: Escape the Vape reached more than **470 participants** in Southeast Utah and continued to receive national recognition for innovative youth prevention work.
- Guiding Good Choices expanded family-based substance use prevention, healthy relationship education, and resilience building by training eight Extension faculty as program leaders.
- Statewide Strong Bodies Strength Training improved physical health and resilience among older adults, reaching over **200 participants** across seven counties, with measurable improvements in fitness and the ability to engage in daily activities safely.
- Living Well self-management programs (two separate programs—chronic disease and chronic pain) increased participant confidence in managing their health.
- The [2025 Elevating Hope Summit](#) reached over **265 attendees**, highlighted key overlaps and strategies for mental health and substance use prevention, and included a law enforcement pre-conference.

"Seeing all in attendance brought hope that we are doing a lot for our community. Even though there is a lot more to do, it was good to see how many 'helpers' from the community were present to learn how to maximize their influence." –2025 Elevating Hope Summit attendee





Stigma Reduction and Harm Reduction



HEART provides practical harm reduction education and promotes safe medication practices to help communities respond effectively to substance use challenges.

- The TriCounty Overdose Prevention Program (TOPP) reached over **4,200 participants**, equipping communities with life-saving overdose response skills.
- Statewide Service Industry Harm Reduction Training prepared nearly **250 high-risk workers** and behavioral health professionals to recognize and respond to opioid overdoses.



- Naloxone trainings and stigma reduction workshops strengthened community readiness and shifted perceptions around substance use and recovery.



- HEART supports local Take Back Day and safe prescription disposal initiatives across the state biannually. Across the two events, over **100 pounds of medications** were collected in Carbon County, and **17 pounds** in Emery County.



- The William A. Bernard (WAB) Warming Center provides support services for individuals experiencing homelessness in Cache County. Approximately **206 guests received 3,877 nights of shelter**, and more than 130 people volunteered over **9,000 hours** and donated **\$459,000** to support operations.
- The Carbon and Emery Opioid and Substance Use Coalition strengthened collaboration across agencies and partners. Members continue to express gratitude for the coalition's impact on the community through programming, events, and support.
- Certified Peer Support Specialist and Family Peer Support Specialist programs expanded Utah's behavioral health workforce through certification trainings, internships, and apprenticeships.

"I was able to save a coworker's life due to the training and Narcan I received at the Uintah Basin Energy Summit."

-Uintah Basin Energy Summit attendee



Strengthening Community Ties



HEART expands local capacity by strengthening partnerships and developing the behavioral health workforce. Training supports coordinated responses to complex health needs. Coalition-building and community paramedicine efforts ensure programming reflects local priorities and promotes sustainable solutions.

a **LIGHT** to REMEMBER

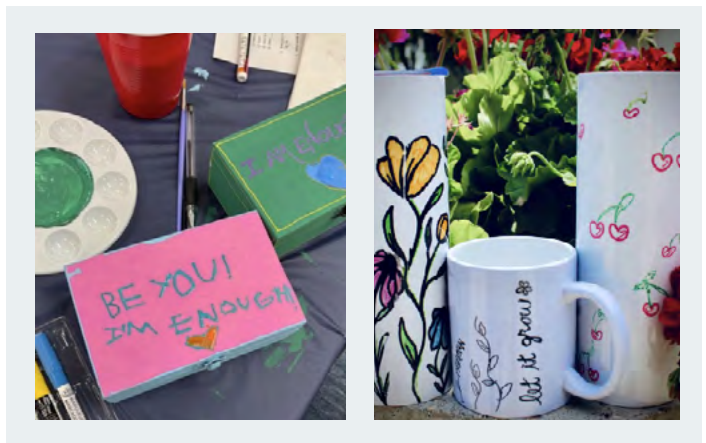
*A Luminary Celebration of Hope Following Loss
in Carbon & Emery Counties*

- Community events such as A Light to Remember expanded overdose awareness and supported community healing. HEART supported additional events, such as Recovery Day, suicide prevention and awareness walks, and prevention coalition events throughout the state.
- The Tooele Recovery Group reached **370 Tooele County residents** in recovery. This peer-led community support group is designed to promote long-term recovery through social connection and shared local resources. Many participants are graduates of the jail-based RISE group therapy program, and the group provides continued peer support from others with similar lived experiences.
- Reaching over **500 participants**, Crafting Change Empowerment workshops and Creating Connections programs promoted emotional wellness and social connection.



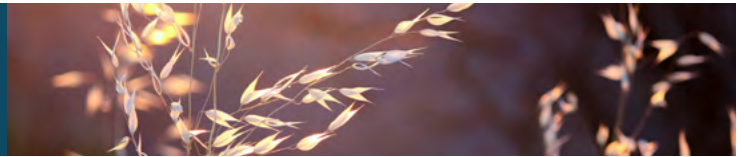
"We love having Crafting Change Empowerment Workshops held at the Museum of Uintah. Not only is it teaching valuable content, but it's bringing people out into the community and increasing social connection."

–Museum assistant





Resilience Building



HEART promotes emotional, physical, and social resilience through strength-based programming that supports long-term well-being. Efforts help communities build skills for recovery and sustained wellness.

Resiliency Development

- Empowering Parents in Recovery dinners reached **76 parents** to help them learn practical tools for talking with their children about substance use in ways that build trust, connection, and prevention skills.
- Participants learned how to navigate unique challenges, discuss lived experience effectively, and the evidence for why and how to create a safe, supportive environment for ongoing, age-appropriate conversations.



"We just need to keep on with building the community of recovering people. It takes time. This is such a valuable thing for Tooele County."
–Rise Recovery Group participant

"I learned protective factors I can create to support my kid." –Empowering Parents in Recovery attendee



Recognition and Leadership

Award	Program or initiative	Awardees
First Place Western Region: Program Excellence Through Research Award State-Level Winner: Program Excellence Through Research	Be Epic, Escape the Vape: A Multi-Component and Research-Based Approach to Rural Vape Prevention	Ashley Yaughner, Cris Meier, Christina Pay, Maria Jose Valasco Burgos, Josie Hatch, and team
First Place Western Region: Innovation in Programming Award First Place State Winner: Diversity Program Award State-Level Winner: Innovation in Programming Award	USU Extension's opioid overdose response trainings for high-risk groups	Aaron Hunt, Gabriela Murza, Tim Keady, Ashley Yaughner, Matt Huntington, and team
County Faculty Cooperator Award	Recognition for the joint development/significant improvement of Extension programs with USU Extension specialists	Gabriela Murza
Suicide Prevention Champion Challenge Coin	HOPE Squad of Carbon, Emery, and Grand counties and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention	Ashley Yaughner
Bear River Health Department Public Health Hero Award for Behavioral Health	Recognition of sustained community impact and leadership in prevention and recovery initiatives	Tim Keady
Keynote speaker	2025 USU Food Security and Hunger Solutions Symposium, highlighting collaborative approaches to addressing behavioral health and community well-being	Tim Keady

Funding and Resource Development

Sustained external funding remains a key driver of HEART's statewide impact.

In 2025, HEART faculty secured approximately \$1.1 million across seven funded initiatives supporting prevention, workforce development, harm reduction, and community wellness programming.

These funding efforts strengthened HEART's ability to scale evidence-based programming and expand services to communities disproportionately impacted by substance use and behavioral health challenges.

Major investments supported:

- Certified Peer Support Specialist workforce expansion.
- Continued implementation of TOPP and related supplements.
- Youth-focused prevention initiatives such as Be Epic, Escape the Vape.
- Community paramedicine and opioid response networks.
- Rural coalition and community resilience programming.

2025 Quick Facts



43

Publications and educational products produced



305

Collaborative partners engaged



32

Scholarly presentations offered



16

Awards and recognitions received across HEART faculty and programs



\$1,096,991

Grant funding secured



31

Virtual programs taught



422

Virtual participants reached



694

Naloxone kits distributed



542

In-Person programs taught



8,138

In-person participants reached

Note: The accomplishments and totals listed are conservative figures based on faculty reporting for the 2025 HEART Initiative annual survey.

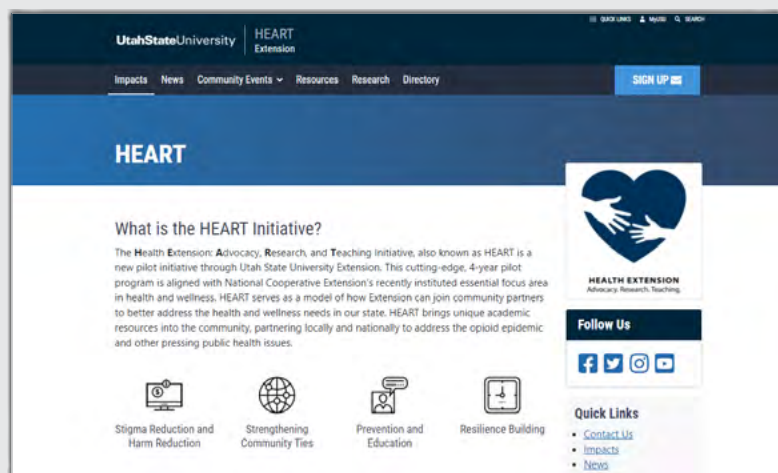
HEART's Online Presence

HEART's Online Presence and Resource Access

HEART maintains a digital presence that expands access to evidence-based health and wellness resources, promotes community engagement, and supports statewide education efforts.

Website and online resources

The [USU Extension HEART](#) website serves as the primary hub for program information, impact reports, and educational materials supporting communities across Utah.



Educational videos and digital learning

The [USU HEART YouTube channel](#) features the “HEART Bunch” educational series and prevention-focused content.



Heart Beat Newsletter



Subscribe to the monthly [HEART Beat newsletter](#), which shares health education, community updates, and prevention resources.

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