

USU Extension Recognized for Rural Health Education

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Utah State University Extension recently received the Rural Education Partner of the Year Award from the Rural Health Association of Utah (RHAU).

The award recognizes the educational opportunities USU Extension provides in rural areas of Utah and its work to combat the rising trend of youth e-cigarette use.

RHAU's mission is to provide a unified voice for improving rural health through leadership, advocacy, coalition building, education, and influencing policy and legislation. As Utah's land-grant institution, USU Extension plays an important role in advancing this mission by leveraging its presence in rural Utah and offering a wide range of educational programs.

"Everyone deserves equal access to healthcare, and as it stands today, access in rural areas does not equal the access in urban areas," said Kasey Shakespear, RHAU executive director. "That is true for Utah and across the nation. That is what makes organizations like RHAU and USU Extension so important—both organizations are working to break down the barriers to access. Rural Utah is a special place and deserves to have champions like USU Extension."

During the awards ceremony, RHAU highlighted USU Extension's practical, evidence-based programs such as "Be Epic, Escape the Vape." The program was launched in 2020 to tackle youth e-cigarette use in rural areas like Carbon, Emery, and Grand counties, where vaping rates were among the highest in the state. In 2019, 48.3% of

12th graders in the Four Corners District reported trying e-cigarettes. Statistics show that youth who vape are nearly seven times more likely than non-users to start smoking traditional cigarettes within 18 months of vaping, marking e-cigarettes as a potential gateway to other substances ([Youth Vaping](#)).

By educating youth, parents, teachers, and communities about vaping's dangers, the program has made great strides in helping youth. By 2023, lifetime use dropped to 32.9%, and past 30-day use fell to 20.2%, showing meaningful progress in reducing youth vaping.

"USU Extension has been regularly educating the public about the harms of youth vaping," said Ashley Yaughner, USU Extension associate professor of health and wellness. "We want the public to know that nicotine can impact brain development in youth, increasing their risk of substance use disorders, memory and attention issues, and anxiety."

Yaughner said that RHAU and USU Extension have been aligned in their missions to address opioid use disorder and other substance-related concerns in rural Utah for the past 7 years, which has bolstered efforts in reaching providers and community members with information to help build knowledge and improve lives.

To learn more about RHAU, visit [. To learn more about programs offered by USU Extension, visit \[extension.usu.edu\]\(#\).](#)

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