

# USU President Signs Hunger Initiative as Extension Launches Food Systems Alliance

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Justen Smith,  
USU Extension interim vice president, speaks at the Food Systems Alliance luncheon.

As food insecurity continues to rise across Utah, Utah State University Extension's Create Better Health Hub recently hosted leaders from across Utah's agriculture, food manufacturing, government, higher education, and community sectors to launch the USU Extension Food Systems Alliance. The new collaboration brings stakeholders together to strengthen food systems, reduce waste, and increase community access to nutritious food.

Justen Smith, USU Extension interim vice president, speaks at the Food Systems Alliance luncheon.  
As part of the event, USU President Brad Mortensen signed the Presidents United to Solve Hunger (PUSH) Commitment, joining university leaders nationwide in pledging support for efforts that address hunger, poverty, and food insecurity through research, education, partnerships, and action. PUSH institutions work collectively toward achieving zero hunger across campuses, communities, and nations. Mortensen discussed the role of land-grant universities in addressing complex challenges, and he reaffirmed USU's commitment to improving student and community well-being, strengthening local economies, and addressing hunger statewide.

According to Feeding America estimates shared during a recent statewide food security gathering, Utah's food insecurity rate increased from 9 percent in 2021 to more than 14 percent in 2024, affecting nearly 484,090 residents, including one in six children (161,000 children). Rising food costs, inflation, drought impacts, and recent

spring freezes have added pressure to household food security across the state.

"No one person or entity can solve food insecurity," said Create Better Health Hub director and one of the event organizers, Lea Palmer. "This year, nutrition security programs nationwide have been hit with major resource and support reductions that will have long-term impacts on our communities. This alliance creates a space for leaders across industries and communities to come together, identify challenges, share ideas, and build solutions that strengthen every stage of the food system."

USU President Brad Mortensen's signature on the President's United to Solve Hunger (PUSH) Commitment.

At the event, Senator Luz Escamilla, chief sponsor of 2022's Senate Bill 133 that established the Food Security Council, said it is critical to support initiatives addressing hunger and food insecurity – particularly for children, so they don't have to wonder where their next meal will come from.

"This alliance provides an opportunity to put 'the Utah way' into practice by bringing stakeholders together and finding opportunities within the systems we currently have," Escamilla said. "It's a matter of organizing, and it is really exciting that USU is leading the way. We want to be part of that conversation and offer support as the alliance grows."

Justen Smith, USU Extension interim vice president, highlighted Extension's unique role in connecting university expertise with communities throughout Utah. He said Extension's statewide presence and long-standing relationships provide a foundation for strengthening food systems.

"Food insecurity is not simply a hunger issue," Smith said. "It's a health issue, an education issue, an economic issue, and ultimately a community issue. Through collaboration, universities can play a powerful role in solving hunger."

Addressing these challenges requires participation from every sector of the food system. Jay Johnson, vice president of operations at Schreiber Foods, discussed sustainability practices that reduce waste and improve resource use. He emphasized the importance of collaboration to create more efficient pathways so that surplus foods are not wasted or underused.

Palmer said Utah's unique combination of agricultural strength, manufacturing capacity, community partnerships, and collaborative culture positions the state to become a national leader in food system innovation.

## About the USU Food Systems Alliance

The USU Food Systems Alliance is a new collaborative initiative housed within the USU Extension program: Create Better Health Hub. The Alliance serves as a convening and resource center focused on advancing policy, systems, and environmental solutions that optimize regional food systems, reduce waste, strengthen food recovery efforts, and improve food and nutrition security throughout Utah and the American West.

## About the Create Better Health Hub

The Create Better Health Hub is USU Extension's statewide nutrition and food security collaborative organization, working to strengthen food and nutrition security through connection, education, community partnerships, workforce development, and systems-based solutions that improve health and well-being across Utah communities. To learn more about the work being done or to find healthy living resources, visit: <https://extension.usu.edu/createbetterhealth/>.

By Dennis Hinkamp, USU Extension

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