

# USU Extension Focuses on Strengthening Utah's Rural Economies

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## USU EXTENSION FOCUSES ON STRENGTHENING UTAH'S RURAL ECONOMIES

As many rural Utah residents are struggling with unemployment or underemployment, a new pilot program has been implemented by Utah State University Extension to help residents in the southern counties develop the skills needed to compete for remote employment.



With the goal of strengthening the economies of rural Utah, the new Rural Online Initiative (ROI) was funded by the legislature in 2018 to allow people to develop skills so they can seek competitive remote jobs without leaving their counties.

The initiative is the brainchild of Darin Bushman, county commissioner in Piute County, who was elected to office in one of the smallest, most poverty-stricken counties in Utah. As he evaluated economic strengths and weaknesses, he discovered that while there were very talented people in the county, many were underemployed, unemployed, had dropped out of the workforce or were geographically bound because a spouse was employed in the county, but there were no employment options for the other potential wage earner.

"I sat in my office posting a freelance job offer, and it hit me – why can't our citizens, with skills to offer, be the ones doing this job rather than someone halfway around the world?" he said. "Our local people can be the ones taking advantage of these online opportunities and marketing their skills outside the bounds of their current geography." Bushman said the idea was presented to local chamber members and other elected officials with positive

response. However, finding the right organization to be the "home" for the program was a challenge. With input from another commissioner, it seemed that USU Extension would be the perfect fit because of their county outreach programs.

"After meeting with USU Extension Vice President Ken White and discussing our concerns and ideas, the ROI was born," he said. "The premise was simple – educate, coach, mentor and teach rural businesses and members of the workforce so they can take advantage of online opportunities. We also wanted to target high school students nearing graduation who were not pursuing higher education to avail them of the opportunities that exist online, which could help reduce the net migration from rural Utah counties."

The Rural Online Initiative, House Bill 327, was sponsored by Representative Michael Noel, with Senator David Hinkins as the floor sponsor. Bushman and Commissioner Victor Iverson from Washington County successfully lobbied for it. It was signed into law by Governor Gary Herbert during the 2018 legislative session. <https://le.utah.gov/~2018/bills/static/HB0327.html>

White said USU Extension is in a prime position to leverage its presence in rural Utah to help residents become better equipped to work as remote employees. "Our extensive statewide infrastructure will help connect rural Utahns with the new and innovative employment opportunities that are available worldwide," he said. "We see this as a way for citizens to keep the high quality of life found in these rural communities, but now they can have increased earning potential."

According to Paul Hill, USU Extension associate professor and principal investigator of the Rural Online Initiative, a new certificate course has been specifically developed to help people succeed as an online freelancer or remote employee.

"Completing the *Master Remote Work Professional* course and earning a certificate will prepare people to prosper in the new economy," he said. "After meeting the skill requirements and earning their certificates, ROI clients will be assisted with job placement in partnership with Utah's Department of Workforce Services."

Linda Gillmor, director of Rural Development for the Governor's Office of Economic Development said that one of the state's strategies to create jobs as part of the Governor's '25K Rural Jobs in 25 Counties by 2020' initiative is to leverage existing broadband.

"In some instances, rural locations have faster speeds than along the Wasatch Front," she said. "The Rural Online Initiative pilot program is an excellent way to use that infrastructure to create jobs in rural Utah."

White said USU Extension has recently hired a senior program coordinator, three program coordinators and one staff assistant to carry out the new program. Each

program coordinator has been assigned several counties to oversee, and the team is now in place and ready to serve these communities.

The Rural Online Initiative team includes Russell Goodrich, senior program coordinator based in Carbon County. He will work with the other program coordinators based in Emery, Sevier and Garfield counties to implement the initiative throughout rural Utah. Mike Sarles, program coordinator based in Garfield County, will oversee Garfield, Kane, Washington, Piute and Iron counties. Jordan Leonard, program coordinator based in Emery County, will oversee Emery, Carbon, San Juan, Grand, Uintah and Daggett counties. Trenton Willson, program coordinator based in Sevier County will oversee Wayne, Sevier, Sanpete and Beaver counties. Emy Swadley is the new assistant for the initiative.

The Rural Online Initiative will host town hall meetings to attract community support and clients. Some counties will have workshops, meetings and resources available this fall, while other counties will start in 2019.

To sign up for an upcoming town hall meeting, to join a remote work cohort or sign up to receive emails and learn of the latest news and opportunities, visit [remoteworkcertificate.com](http://remoteworkcertificate.com).

systems from Utah State University. He brings over 30 years of training experience to this new position and has provided a wide variety of business and computer training to hundreds of high school and college students, along with a number of private businesses. He has provided leadership in past positions as department chair, dean and CTE director at the College of Eastern Utah and as an associate vice chancellor and director at USU Eastern. He loves forming new partnerships and has successfully partnered with DWS and local businesses to obtain grants and start new programs, including implementing a new CTE advising initiative and starting a new internship program. He is married with five children and five grandchildren, and he is excited to meet three additional grandchildren in the next few months. He loves the outdoors and the mountains.



**Mike Sarles**

Mike Sarles is a program coordinator for the Rural Online Initiative Pilot Program based in Garfield County. He recently came from the private sector with 20 plus years of experience in international business, sales and online marketing. He has most recently managed a remote team while also working remotely. He received his bachelor's degree from Brigham Young University. He speaks Mandarin Chinese and enjoys traveling to Asia. He is married with 5 children (three born in Asia). He is passionate about high tech and e-commerce. When he's not staring at a screen, he enjoys mountain biking, scuba diving, swimming, hanging out with his kids, cooking and baking. He is also a volunteer firefighter and is active in his community.



**Russell Goodrich**

Russell Goodrich is the senior program coordinator for the Rural Online Initiative. He has a bachelor's degree in business education and a master's degree in information

**Jordan Leonard**

Jordan Leonard is a program coordinator for the Rural Online Initiative and will be based out of Emery County. He has a bachelor's degree in sales and marketing through the technical sales program from Weber State University. He has 10 years of experience managing his own small business in rural Utah and spent the last 3 years as the Emery County Economic Development Director. Under his direct supervision, tourism in Emery County has taken flight, a FIRST robotics program has been brought into the school district and he has been a driver in assisting businesses with grants, incentives and the training they have needed to succeed in a coal-devastated region. He loves to golf, fish, coach his son's baseball teams, camp and spend time with family and friends.

**Trenton Willson**

Trenton Willson is a new program coordinator for the Rural Online Initiative. He is a career advisor with experience in the public and private sectors. He began his professional career as an accountant while attending the University of Utah, graduating with a bachelor of arts in accounting. His experience includes working for Marriott International, the State of Utah and several other small businesses, including his own. He will be based in Sevier County and will serve the rural workforce and businesses with educational workshops, training and mentoring for online opportunities in remote employment, freelance work and e-commerce.

**Emy Swadley**

Emy Swadley is the new assistant for the Rural Online Initiative. She has been an employee with USU Extension for over 3 years, serving in various capacities including



4-H State Office  
program coordinator, 4-H Teen Council Advisor, and eXtension virtual assistant. She graduated with her bachelor's degree from Brigham Young University in recreational management and has a background in event coordinating. She loves the outdoors, traveling, cooking and watching a good comedy.

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