

# USU Extension's Rural Online Initiative Program Receives National and Regional Awards

Julene Reese

06/05/2020



ROI Team

Utah State University Extension's Rural Online Initiative (ROI) program recently received two awards: the Innovation and Creativity Award from the National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals (NACDEP) and the 2020 Western Extension Directors Association (WEDA) Award of Excellence.

The NACDEP award recognizes an association member or group for developing an outstanding program or effort to integrate innovation and creativity into community development programs. The WEDA award recognizes Extension outreach education programming that has achieved outstanding accomplishments, results and impacts in addressing contemporary issues in one or more of the 13 Western states and Pacific Island U.S. Territories.

"We are extremely fortunate to have this innovative rural online program in our state, especially during this time when working from home is a necessity for so many," said Ken White, Utah State University Extension vice president. "This inventive team has created a program that is making significant financial and environmental impacts in Utah. The program is also being used as a role model in other states, and the impacts are far-reaching."

Funded by the Utah State Legislature in 2018, the ROI program was designed to help residents develop the skills necessary to seek competitive remote jobs without leaving their counties. Overall goals for the program are reducing unemployment in rural Utah communities, increasing median household income and promoting environmental sustainability.

According to Paul Hill, USU Extension professor and program director of the Rural Online Initiative, the program has grown significantly in the last 2 years and is now assisting hundreds of individuals. He said a certification, the Master Remote Work Professional certificate course, has been developed to train individuals for success as an online freelancer, remote employee or e-commerce entrepreneur. To date, 849 participants have completed the course requirements, earning a professional certificate from USU Extension.

"It's exciting to see the number of individuals and families across rural Utah that have been lifted up by the ROI program," he said. "It has made a significant impact and will continue to help prepare rural Utah for the future."

Regarding the awards, Hill said creativity is found in ideas, and innovation comes from action.

"The awards reflect the incredible amount of hard work and collective creative efforts of the ROI team," he said. "It is such a privilege to work with each person on this team. I am very proud of the progress we have made as well as the progress made by all those who have taken our courses."

Between October 2018 and November 2019, the ROI program served 15 rural counties in Utah. To date, 109 graduates found remote work since completing the course. The economic impact of remote jobs in rural counties is equivalent to over 3,000 jobs in urban counties. Across all graduates who found remote work, total salaries increased by 36 percent. Further analysis showed 43 percent of graduates who found remote work believed their salaries could increase by approximately 30 percent over the next year. This suggests that state government, cities and counties may expect an anticipated increase in tax revenue from remote workers in the next fiscal year.

In response to COVID-19, the ROI program accommodated an increased number of participants who were adjusting to mandatory remote work policies. All course fees were waived for 239 additional participants from urban Utah counties. The increased participation provided new opportunities to support businesses adapting

to the sudden change of employees working from home. In addition, the ROI team conducted over a dozen online workshops teaching basic skills in implementing video conferences.

A Master Remote Work Leader certificate course is also offered for supervisors and managers, and there were 20 graduates from the course in April. Seventy percent said they were likely to create remote work positions in their organization and hire qualified rural Utah residents.

For more information on the ROI program, visit <https://remoteworkcertificate.com/>.

*Writer: Julene Reese, [Julene.reese@usu.edu](mailto:Julene.reese@usu.edu), 435-757-6418*

*Contact: Paul Hill, [Paul.hill@usu.edu](mailto:Paul.hill@usu.edu), 435-313-1667*