

Utah Marriage Commission History and Responsibilities



Utah Marriage
Commission
at Utah State University

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A 2020 U.S. Congressional report, *“A Policy Agenda for Social Capital,”* produced under the direction of Utah Senator Mike Lee, explores “the evolving nature, quality, and importance of our associational life” – our families, communities, workplaces, and religious congregations – that “are critical to forming our character and capacities, providing our lives with meaning and purpose, and addressing the challenges we face in an increasingly disconnected world.” Utah consistently ranks as the state with the highest social capital, according to Sen. Lee, and “it provides an aspirational vision of what could be elsewhere.” Utah is noteworthy for its public policy efforts to help Utahns form and sustain healthy, stable marriages, a crucial element of the social capital that undergirds strong communities and societies.

Since 1998, these efforts have been publicly guided by the Utah Marriage Commission (UMC). Then Governor Mike Leavitt, with the urging and planning of first-lady Jackie Leavitt, set up a volunteer commission reporting to the Governor’s Office. Utah was the first state to have an official state commission focused on strengthening marriage.

In 2004, the UMC was transferred to the Department of Workforce Services (DWS) to take advantage of TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) federal funding that came to DWS each year. A major purpose of TANF is to strengthen marriages and increase the number of children growing up in stable, healthy, two-parent families. Mrs. Leavitt, a long-time cheerleader of the Commission and the Honorary Chair, helped facilitate the transition to DWS where it enjoyed significant funding support. However, after several years, a shift in priorities and focus within DWS created the need for a new host of the Commission. In 2013, the Utah legislature formally placed the Commission in statute (63M-15), and gave

stewardship to the Department of Human Services (DHS), with its mission of providing services aimed at helping individuals and families thrive. Despite similar goals, differences in approach (prevention vs. intervention) and focus (couples vs child/family) hindered a fully synergistic UMC-DHS relationship.

So, in 2021, Rep. Melissa Ballard, the UMC chair, and Sen. Todd Weiler, a member of the UMC, sponsored legislation (HB 55) to place the Commission within Utah State University Extension, with its mission to translate research into programs and resources to improve the lives of individuals, families, and communities throughout Utah. The bill passed and further clarified the scope and responsibilities of the Commission, outlining nine general functions:

- (1) promote coalitions and collaborative efforts to uphold and encourage a strong and healthy culture of strong and lasting marriages and stable families;
- (2) contribute to greater awareness of the importance of marriage in an effort to reduce divorce and unwed parenthood in the state;
- (3) promote public policies that support marriage;
- (4) promote programs and activities that educate individuals and couples on how to achieve strong, successful, and lasting marriages, including promoting and assisting in the offering of:
 - (a) events;
 - (b) classes and services, including those designed to promote strong, healthy, and lasting marriages and prevent domestic violence;
 - (c) marriage and relationship education conferences for the public and professionals;
 - (d) enrichment seminars;
- (5) actively promote measures designed to maintain and strengthen marriage, family, and the relationships between spouses and parents and children;
- (6) support volunteerism and private financial contributions and grants in partnership with the commission and in support of the commission's purposes and activities for the benefit of the state as provided in this section;
- (7) regularly publicize information on premarital counseling and education services available in the state that comply with Section 30-1-34;
- (8) approve an online course meeting the requirements of Section 30-1-34;
- (9) for purposes of Section 30-1-34, recognize one or more national organizations that certify family life educators.

Dr. Brian Higginbotham, professor and associate vice president for Extension at USU, was enthusiastic about hosting the Commission’s work. Dr. Higginbotham served previously on the UMC and understood well it's mission.

And he was an active practitioner-scholar providing relationship education in the state and researching its effectiveness. [Dr. David Schramm](#), USU associate professor and family life extension specialist, works alongside Dr. Higginbotham and is the faculty liaison between UMC and USU. Dr. Schramm came to USU from the University of Missouri where he directed the [ShowMe Healthy Relationship program](#) funded by a multi-million-dollar federal grant.

A set of volunteer marriage scholars, practitioners, and other professionals from across Utah direct and support the Commission's activities. UMC also includes five Utah legislators representing both chambers and both sides of the aisle. The day-to-day work of the Commission is the responsibility of Dr. Alan Hawkins. Hawkins retired from Brigham Young University in 2023 after 33 years of teaching and research. He is a leading scholar on relationship education and has been involved in many public policy initiatives over the last 20 years to promote relationship education services for lower income couples. He served as a volunteer on the UMC since 2004 and chaired the Commission twice before taking on the day-to-day duties as a capstone to his academic career.

Although the UMC's core services continue to be supported with TANF funds, additional sources of funding have emerged. In 2018, the Utah legislature passed a bill ([SB 54](#)) that allows counties offering online marriage license applications to charge a \$20 fee to support the work of the Utah Marriage Commission. But the legislation also provided an incentive for engaged couples to invest in the success of their marriage by participating in premarital education or counseling. Those who do invest qualify for a \$20 deduction of this fee. In addition to TANF and wedding license fees, the Commission is now positioned to produce a third financial stream through public-private partnerships, philanthropic donations, and revenue generating services (e.g., sponsors, advertisements, affiliate agreements and other collaborations)

Utah is unique among states in supporting for nearly 25 years a state-level public policy effort – now embedded in statute – that provides relationship education services and marriage-strengthening activities to its citizens. The state initiative now appears to have a model for financially sustaining the operation and an on-going relationship with the legislature. The UMC has been resilient, persevering through early growing pains, and is now thriving under its new host, USU Extension. It is also integrated with its USU Extension partner, [Healthy Relationships Utah](#), with its broader mission of strengthening families and supported by federal and state grants.

Utah Marriage Commission Educational Resources and Services

The mission of the Utah Marriage Commission is to provide Utahns with educational resources and services to help form and sustain healthy relationships and strong, stable marriages. UMC emphasizes easily accessible, brief educational services, most of them delivered via their digital platform, [StrongerMarriage.org](#), over more intense programmatic education and formal curricula (which is [Healthy Relationships Utah's](#) focus). This includes podcasts, webinars, e-courses, blogs, videos, text messages, downloadable guidebooks, and more to reach a busy contemporary audience of digital natives.

These resources are available at no charge on the UMC website: [StrongerMarriage.org](#). It hosts an impressive list of [webinars](#) many of them featuring Utah marriage counselors, that generally take on more narrow but timely topics (“Coping with Race-related Stress and Trauma,” “Mixed-faith Marriages”, “Bridging the Libido Divide”). A private, on-demand webinar is an optimal way to get help on these sensitive topics.

The [Stronger Marriage Connection](#) podcast – providing “tips and tools, research and resources, to strengthen relationships” – is a new service in 2022. The engaging hosts are Dr. Dave (mentioned earlier) and marriage therapist Dr. Liz ([Liz Hale](#)). The professionally produced podcast has an upbeat vibe to it that keeps listeners smiling.

UMC provides free vouchers for Utah engaged couples to take the [MarriageREADY](#) course. A powerful online course for engaged or seriously dating couples. In just 6 hours, they will lay the groundwork for a lasting relationship with guided lessons, practical tools, and meaningful conversations.

Also, Utah couples can take for free two of the most researched relationship inventories in the world, [READY](#) and [RELATE](#). Developed at Brigham Young University over 30 years, these online instruments ask partners hundreds of questions about themselves, their personal histories, and their relationship, all of which are empirically linked to successful marriages. The [READY](#) assessment guides individuals in evaluating their personal readiness for a serious relationship and the [RELATE](#) assessment assists couples to gain a better understanding of dynamics within their relationship. When both partners have answered the questions, they get a detailed report of their relationship strengths and potential problem areas that could spark meaningful conversations. Some couples use

the feedback in conjunction with pre-marital or marriage counseling as a way to work on their relationship.

UMC's come-one-come-all services are for all income brackets. Same-sex couples are welcome, too. And UMC is sensitive to the growing Spanish-speaking population in Utah and is working to ensure many UMC resources will be available in Spanish. Nearly a third of marriages in Utah are a remarriage for one or both partners. UMC is working to upgrade their resources for remarrying and remarried couples. The long-term goal is to make StrongerMarriage.org the go-to, one-stop resource center for Utah couples in all stages of relationships and in all different circumstances.

Given such bold vision, UMC is actively building connections and partnerships with other like-minded offices, professional groups, and services. For instance, the Commission is weaving ties with Governor Spencer Cox's new [Office of Families](#) that "aims to support Utah families through proactive rather than reactive strategies and policies." Governor Cox said in his 2022 state-of-the-state address that strong marriages and families is one of the secret ingredients to Utah's economic success and wants a more direct coordination of all Utah policies intended to help families succeed. UMC is also nurturing a fruitful relationship with the [Utah Association for Marriage and Family Therapy](#), a group of 500+ trained counselors that work daily with Utah couples. UMC also partners with the County Clerk Offices scattered throughout Utah to provide a printed "Marriage Handbook" to couples getting their marriage license.

Beyond these specific resources and services, UMC promotes a meta-message that healthy and stable marriages are a result not of luck or simple compatibility, but of commitment, learning, work, and growth. It is regular inputs of smart energy that keep a relationship vital and growing.