

USU Extension Collaborates with Local Governments to Increase Vaccination in Rural Communities

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The TriCounty Vaccine Improvement Program aims to increase vaccination in rural northeastern Utah.

With support from a nationally funded grant, Aaron Hunt, assistant professor of Kinesiology and Health Science and USU Health and Wellness Extension specialist, will continue developing immunization education and outreach in rural communities in northeastern Utah through a project called the TriCounty Vaccine Improvement Program (TC-VIP).

TC-VIP is a partnership between USU Extension, the TriCounty Health Department, and the Mountainlands Community Health Center. Through education, outreach, and training, the project aims to increase confidence in vaccines among adults in rural and other underserved communities in the tri-county area of Daggett, Duchesne, and Uintah counties.

According to Hunt, routine vaccination declined during the COVID-19 pandemic, posing a threat to community health. "I have a background in public health and know that vaccines are essential to protect the health of our communities," said Hunt. "The goal of this project is to restore confidence in vaccines and help adults stay up to date on their recommended vaccines, which will improve health." Recommended immunizations for adults include vaccines for the flu, TDAP (tetanus, diphtheria, and whooping cough), shingles, and hepatitis B.

Hunt is joined in these efforts by local leaders Yvette Rea, family wellness coordinator for USU Extension in Duchesne county, KayCee Asay, director of nursing for the TriCounty Health Department, and Laci Day, rural behavior specialist at Mountainlands Community Health Center.

The program's new grant funding comes from a nationwide program called EXCITE (Extension Collaboration on Immunization Teaching and Engagement), which was created by the U.S. Cooperative Extension, a nationwide education system operating through land-grant universities in partnership with federal, state, and local governments. The grant began in June of this year and will continue through the end of 2024.



Dr. Aaron Hunt

For Hunt, the impact of vaccines has deep personal relevance. "My father had cancer that was caused by the Human Papilloma Virus, or HPV, which can now be prevented through vaccination," he said. "Knowing that vaccines can prevent some cancers is life-altering."

Hunt and his team will provide specific outreach to the Hispanic and senior populations in the region, starting with a [Hispanic health fair](#) in Myton, Utah this October to promote vaccines. A significant part of these education efforts includes helping individuals on Medicare know which vaccines are available to them free of charge, especially as Medicare coverage for shingles and TDAP vaccines was recently expanded. They will also provide trainings to healthcare, public health, and extension professionals in the area to help them discuss and

promote recommended vaccines with the communities they serve.

In addition to improving vaccine rates among high-risk groups in the region, Hunt said that TC-VIP could impact vaccine rates among children, which have also declined in combination with increasing vaccine exemptions in schools. "I want to educate people about the benefits of vaccination and give them the information to make informed decisions," he said.

EXCITE is made possible through agreements between the National Institute of Food and Agriculture in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Extension Foundation in partnership with the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy.