

IDRPP Executive Director Matthew Wappett Addresses Statewide Disability at USU Blue Plate Event



IDRPP Director Matthew Wappett at the Blue Plate Research event

In April, Matthew Wappett, Ph.D., executive director of the Institute for Disability Research, Policy & Practice (IDRPP) within the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services, presented at Blue Plate Research, a health and well-being series that highlights the discoveries and research efforts at USU. Blue Plate Research aims to share easy-to-understand research with statewide health advocates, stakeholders, and the public.

At the event, Wappett discussed the growing need for mental health support among people with disabilities, the history of disability policy in the United States, and the IDRPP's ongoing role in shaping national disability research and advocacy.

"One of the areas we are really focused on at the Institute is the mental health of people with disabilities," Wappett explained. "Although 30 percent of all adults have mental health issues, 60 percent of individuals with disabilities have co-occurring mental health issues." Wappett said that many of those mental health challenges stem from barriers people encounter in everyday life.

In 1972, Marvin Fifield, Ph.D., USU professor and department head of Special Education, developed the Center for Persons with Disabilities (CPD) at USU, which he directed for 34 years. The name was officially changed to the Institute for Disability Research, Policy & Practice in 2021. The IDRPP has grown into one of the

largest University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD) programs in the nation and is recognized as a pioneer in research, training, technical assistance, and services for children and adults with disabilities, families, and the professionals who serve them.

Today, the IDRPP's mission is to connect research with real-world needs so evidence-based practices will reach the people who need them.

"We are a research institute," said Wappett. "We cover a vast range of programs. We are working to create inclusive communities and improve lives for children and adults with disabilities through sustainable innovation, collaborative research, responsive service, and interdisciplinary training and education."

He added, "USU is a land grant institution, and the vast majority of our work is focused on community engagement. It's a perfect match for the land grant mission."

A major role of the IDRPP is working with Utah legislators on policy and legislation for people with disabilities. At the recent 2026 Utah legislative session, Wappett and his team participated in Disability Advocacy Day at the Utah State Capitol.

"Disability Advocacy Day makes the disability community in Utah more visible," said IDRPP Executive Director Matthew Wappett. "For many policymakers and even the public, people with significant disabilities are often invisible. Getting people to show up and have a visible presence at the Capitol is important because it reminds policymakers that people with disabilities aren't invisible and/or incapable. People with disabilities are citizens, voters, and deserving of respect and support."

The team held a session to train more than 100 attendees about the legislative process and ways to get involved. "Many people with disabilities haven't had the same opportunity to learn about the policymaking process, so they are often at a disadvantage when it comes to engaging in the American political process," said Wappett. "By providing policy process training for people with disabilities and their families, we help them learn how to influence policy decisions."

Today, the IDRPP employs 250 researchers and staff. It oversees hundreds of projects focused on disability services and research in many states and territories. "In FY25, just in terms of scale, we administered 276 grant

or contract funded projects focused on birth to death,” Wappett said.

Beyond policy and research, Wappett emphasized one central message in his Blue Plate presentation: disability affects everyone. “Disability is the most common aspect of human experience outside of birth and death,” he said. “Disability is something that we’re all going to experience at some point in our life. The programs that we create really try to address that overarching sort of lifespan view of disability—all the aspects from the social aspects to the policy aspects, the developmental and even the medical aspects of disability.”

To learn more about the IDRPP, visit its [website](#). Visit the [USU Research YouTube Channel](#) to view Matthew Wappett’s entire presentation.