

What Can I Do?

A SERIES TO HELP UTAHNS ENGAGE



NO. 20 | MAY 23, 2022

What Utah County Leaders and Residents Can Do to Strengthen the Impact of Girls and Women in Their Area

UTAH WOMEN &
LEADERSHIP
Project

Utah County is full of engaged, passionate individuals who frequently ask the question, “What can I do to strengthen the impact of girls and women in this area?” To provide specific answers to that question, the **Utah Women & Leadership Project** (UWLP) and Utah State University (USU) Extension hosted a “think tank” gathering to collect ideas for individuals, groups, and organizations interested in supporting and empowering girls and women in their area.

This idea sheet is based on a 2022 gathering of 38 leaders in Utah County. Girls and women face challenges unique to the area in which they live, and the goal of this gathering was to identify those barriers and determine strategies and initiatives that local leaders and residents can implement to address them. This document includes recommendations in the following areas: education, health and wellbeing, home and family, business and economics, culture and religion, and community engagement.

EDUCATION

Leaders in Utah County emphasized the essential role schools play in developing leadership confidence and competence in girls and young women through curriculum and opportunities. Ensuring that women complete high school and obtain college certificates and degrees is critically important to continue a woman’s development. Recommendations include:

- Emphasize that girls and young women do not need to choose their future at a young age as there is power in exploring hobbies, nurturing interests, accepting opportunities, trying something new, and that they can be and do many things.
- Recognize and address gender bias at school, use inclusive language, and promote opportunities for all students.
- Utilize curriculum that teaches emotional intelligence.
- Inform girls about the variety of options they have for college majors and careers, including science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM).
- Teach the importance of college education to girls and young women through stories, role models, and by emphasizing the influence of a mother who finishes her own education.

- Reinforce the value of earned certificates and degrees by asking women how they use the knowledge, experience, and skills in their lives.
- Support women in pursuing graduate degrees with resources and mentoring; help them pivot directions and reallocate resources when needed to sustain their educational journey.

HEALTH & WELLBEING

Concern over the mental health and emotional wellbeing for girls and women in Utah County emerged as a primary theme. Negative self-esteem, poor body image, and low confidence levels are compounded when women criticize and judge each other. Further, the pervasive influence of social media cannot be overstated. Recommendations include:

- Empower girls and women to speak up and advocate for themselves.
- Normalize consent by teaching how to set and enforce boundaries.
- Eliminate the pressure to be perfect by encouraging girls and women to take risks and reframe failure as an integral component in the growth process.
- Encourage women to support one another through recognizing positive and varied forms of personal development, celebrating accomplishments, and helping each other set and achieve goals.
- Counter negative social media influences by: teaching that algorithms manipulate information, sharing positive messages, highlighting girls and women who succeed, complimenting skills and strengths, and minimizing comments about physical appearance.

HOME & FAMILY

In Utah County, the setting and role of home and family are foundational as this is where children first learn about their roles and potential, as well as expectations for behavior, boundaries, choices, opportunities, and gender roles. Girls often receive mixed messages as parents want their daughters to dream big, but many mothers do not participate in or pursue education, hobbies, or activities outside the home. Recommendations include:

- Inspire girls to investigate a myriad of life choices including marriage, motherhood, education, and careers. Reinforce that they can do and be more than one thing at a time, and honor the choices they make.
- Prepare girls for a life that will likely veer from what is planned and expected by exposing them to real-life mentors and role models. Help them set realistic expectations rather than hope for a fairy-tale future.
- Teach boys how to be a supportive husband and involved father.
- Reevaluate gender roles for women and men and adjust responsibilities to distribute unpaid work responsibilities more evenly.

BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

In the business sector, Utah County women struggle with perception—both how they see themselves and how they are seen. While many women work part-time jobs, there are not as many women in full-time jobs or leadership positions. Women may be overlooked for these positions or required to perform at higher levels to prove their value to an organization. Recommendations include:

- Host career fairs to expose girls and women to male-dominated industries, nontraditional careers, and new innovative opportunities.
- Provide training and mentoring to help women learn the value of the unpaid work they do at home and how it transfers to a resume and professional work experience, apply for jobs that stretch them, negotiate salary and schedules, change careers, and pursue leadership roles.
- Call out and challenge conscious and unconscious bias (e.g., women completing their education to pursue a career as a back-up plan, the gender wage gap, lack of female leadership).
- Urge businesses to conduct an internal review of their DEI policies and the flexibility of their workplaces and make adjustments as needed.
- Increase the number of women on boards and in leadership positions; ensure they receive the title that reflects the work they do so there are visible role models of female leadership.
- Leverage capital into community and nonprofit organizations that women run, and recognize the workplace equivalent of their unpaid community work and leadership experience.
- Encourage businesses and nonprofit organizations to evaluate the demographics they serve and expand their influence to reach more girls and women.
- Highlight and recognize businesses that support women.

CULTURE & RELIGION

The “think tank” attendees acknowledged that the culture (why and how we do what we do) in Utah County is heavily influenced by religion, which often makes it difficult to separate the two. Recommendations include:

- Instill leadership traits in girls and young women by giving them leadership opportunities and supportive training at a young age.
- Include all genders in activities that have been gender exclusive (e.g., outdoor adventures, sports).
- Create opportunities for girls and women to connect outside of religious structures; invite all girls and women to participate regardless of race, age, or religious membership.
- Reexamine traditions and discard those that limit the growth and potential of girls and women. Create new traditions that value women’s choices (e.g., education, politics, family, career).
- Develop a culture that encourages girls and women to report harassment, assault, and/or violence, and one that supports them through the process.
- Provide mentoring and training for men who need help redefining positive masculinity, setting and respecting boundaries, and interacting with women in a healthy and comfortable manner.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Utah County leaders appreciate the strengths inherent in this unique location including its high rate of volunteerism and its value of family. They also recognize the lack of strong female role models in every area this report addresses, as well as the negative and even “liberal” stereotypes that exist when women speak out, assert themselves, and lead. Recommendations include:

- Share historical and contemporary stories of girls and women who experience challenges, failures, and successes to increase confidence, collaboration, and healthy competition. Counter negative images of women in the media (e.g., “Real Housewives,” “16 & Pregnant”).
- Create mentoring programs, groups, and networks to normalize, teach, and support women as leaders.
- Identify potential female political candidates, encourage them to run for office at all levels, and train and support them through the process.
- Continue conversations to address issues and create sustainable change.
- Empower male allies who will advocate for girls and women in multiple spheres.

CONCLUSION

When we listen and respond to concerns regarding the needs of girls and women in Utah County, we will be better able to change harmful or ineffective policies and programs, sustain current effective actions and leaders, identify and solve local problems, and create responsive initiatives. The UWLP encourages leaders and residents to use this document as needed to affect change.

Utah Women & Leadership Project • www.utwomen.org • uwlp@usu.edu

Thank you to Curtis Blair of the Utah Valley Chamber, Cindy Jenkins of USU Extension, community volunteer Karen Hill, and to the many collaborators and partners in Utah County who supported the community conversation. Report authors: Angie Kleven & Dr. Susan R. Madsen.