

HEALTHY UTAH COMMUNITY



Social Connection Toolkit

STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE SOCIAL HEALTH



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Why This Toolkit?

More than **1 in 3 Utahns feel lonely often**, placing Utah among the **top five loneliest states**. Because social connection plays such a key role in health, safety, and quality of life, it has become a **statewide priority**.

In 2025, the Utah Legislature reinforced this focus by passing **S.C.R. 4**, encouraging activities like volunteering, shared meals, and neighborhood gatherings, and establishing the **last Saturday in April** as **Utah Community Health Day**. In addition, social connection is highlighted as a key priority in the Utah Health Improvement Plan (2023–2028).

To advance social connection across the country, the U.S. Surgeon General released an Advisory in 2023 encouraging governments to adopt a **Connection-in-All-Policies approach**. This approach recognizes that every sector of society influences social connection and that policies within each sector can either hinder or facilitate connection.

Cities and towns play an essential role in this work. Local leaders shape the spaces, programs, and everyday experiences that help residents meet, connect, and feel they belong.

To support that work, **Get Healthy Utah** and the **Healthy Utah Community Program** created this toolkit. It provides practical strategies, local examples, and ready-to-use tools to help leaders build stronger social connections in their communities.

Did you know?

Lacking social connection is as harmful to health as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.

Social Connection Matters

How well do you know your neighbors?

Well-connected communities are healthier, safer, and more resilient.

Studies show that social cohesion can increase an individual's longevity by 50%. When residents know and trust one another, they look out for each other, participate more, and feel proud of where they live — yet many Utahns are missing that sense of belonging. Feelings of isolation can weaken the fabric that holds neighborhoods together and affect the mental and physical health of residents.

Strong social connection creates strong communities.

Below are research-backed benefits of social connection:

Individual Benefits

- Lowers risk of anxiety and depression
- Reduces risk of heart disease, stroke, and other chronic conditions
- Helps protect against cognitive decline
- Improves immune function
- Supports longer life and overall well-being

Community Benefits

- Builds trust and a stronger sense of belonging
- Increases civic participation and volunteering
- Enhances safety through stronger neighborhood networks
- Supports resilience during emergencies or crises
- Encourages local pride and community engagement

The Role of Cities and Towns

Social connection doesn't happen by accident—it happens by design.

Cities and towns shape the spaces, programs, and experiences that help people meet, interact, and feel they belong.

A report on Social Connection in America from Stanford University found that **more than 50% of adults do not attend clubs or organizational events and rarely connect with their neighbors**, which points to a need for stronger community environments and more accessible public gathering spaces.

Local leaders can strengthen social connection by:

- **Creating welcoming public spaces** where people naturally gather
- **Supporting community events** that bring neighbors together
- **Designing walkable, active neighborhoods** that encourage everyday interaction
- **Partnering with local organizations, schools, and businesses**
- **Promoting volunteer opportunities** and civic engagement
- **Encouraging inclusive communication** so all residents feel seen and informed

Small changes can make a big difference. When leaders prioritize connection, communities become healthier, safer, and more resilient.

Strong social connection creates stronger communities.

Vulnerable Populations

Anyone can experience loneliness, but some residents face greater barriers to connection than others. As you plan community initiatives, consider how your efforts can reach and support these more vulnerable groups.

OLDER ADULTS



PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES



MINORITY GROUPS



Other groups to consider include **youth**, **single parents**, people who are **economically disadvantaged**, and **those who do not speak English** as their first language.

What other populations in your community may face increased barriers to connection?

What's the Difference?

Social isolation = having few social contacts

Loneliness = feeling alone

Designing Social Connection for Everyone

Strategies to foster social connection should be **intentional, inclusive, and responsive to community needs**. These considerations can help improve participation and long-term success:

Use direct community input

- Residents should help shape the programs intended to serve them. Consider who has been left out of engagement efforts in the past.

Build trust through partnerships

- Partnerships with trusted community organizations can strengthen outreach and encourage participation.

Prioritize accessibility

- Ensure programs are affordable, ADA-accessible, and available at convenient times, with supports such as childcare, transportation, and translated materials when needed.



What You Can Do

This toolkit highlights practical, proven strategies you can use to foster better social connection in your community. Whether you're a local leader, coalition member, or engaged resident, these approaches can be adapted to fit your community's size, culture, and needs.

Below are four key pathways we recommend considering. Each section of the toolkit dives deeper with examples, tips, and tools you can put into action.

Public Gathering Spaces

Strengthen the places where people naturally gather. Parks, libraries, civic centers, and local businesses can all become welcoming hubs that encourage interaction and a sense of belonging. These spaces should be accessible from different modes of transportation.

Community Events and Activities

Create opportunities for people to come together around common interests through festivals, recreation programs, youth activities, art and music events, volunteer opportunities, cultural celebrations, and more.

Skill-Building Programs

Help residents build the communication, leadership, and interpersonal skills that support stronger connections. This includes programs like community dialogues, intergenerational mentoring, or workshops on empathy and active listening.

Virtual Opportunities

Use technology to bridge physical distance, increase access, and keep people engaged. Virtual events, online communities, and digital resource hubs can complement in-person efforts and reach residents who face barriers to participation.

Public Gathering Spaces

A connected community is built through more than events alone—people also need everyday places where they feel welcome, comfortable, and able to interact naturally. Accessible public transportation is also needed to reach these spaces. Parks, libraries, trails, town centers, and even small gathering spots like plazas or community rooms can become powerful tools for social connection when they are designed and maintained with inclusion and safety in mind.

Cities and towns play a central role in shaping these environments. Prioritizing a built environment that is designed almost exclusively for cars only intensifies loneliness. Thoughtful planning can turn public spaces into hubs of activity, belonging, and community pride.

Examples



Koosharem has a large population of senior residents. To ensure they aren't alone at home during the dark winter months, Koosharem built a new community center. The town uses the space to bring together residents of all ages by hosting classes, shared meals, and community events.



Kearns built a beautiful mobility hub in front of its public library. The hub makes it possible for residents of all ages and abilities to access transportation services, enjoy public space, and experience a sense of community. With better transportation access and convenience, Kearns residents can more easily connect to others within their community and beyond.

Intervention Ideas

Walkable, welcoming streets

- Add benches, lighting, landscaping, and safe crossings to make streets friendlier for walking and conversation.

Community hubs and third spaces

- Support libraries, recreation centers, senior centers, clean, comfortable parks that naturally bring people together.

Effective public transportation

- Enable residents of all ages and abilities to reach and participate in economic and social activities through transit and paratransit services.

Placemaking projects

- Create murals, pocket parks, play areas, or local art that celebrate local identity and invite people to linger.

Accessible and inclusive design

- Consider mobility needs, sensory-friendly elements, multilingual signage, and culturally welcoming features.

Safe public environments

- Improve lighting, maintain clean and visible spaces, and collaborate with public safety partners to ensure residents feel secure.

Community Events & Activities

Shared experiences are one of the most effective ways to bring people together. When residents participate in activities together—whether through recreation, creative activities, volunteering, or community programs—they are more likely to form new connections and feel a greater sense of belonging.

Cities and towns can help create these moments by organizing events, supporting recreation programs, and partnering with local organizations. Recreation departments, youth opportunities and programs, and adaptive recreation activities can provide welcoming spaces for connection across neighborhoods, cultures, generations, and abilities.

Examples



Salt Lake City hosts the Gleeeful Choir, a free dementia-friendly choir created by Jewish Family Service, where individuals with dementia and their caregivers can sing and connect. The choir meets weekly at a local library to practice and puts on quarterly concerts for the public.



Wasatch Adaptive Sports (WAS) provides recreational opportunities for individuals with disabilities, helping participants achieve unique goals and experience physical, mental, and social benefits. WAS serves communities across Salt Lake and Utah Counties, including Taylorsville, Draper, Salt Lake, Highland, and Provo.

Learn more: gethealthyutah.org/healthyutahcommunity



Intervention Ideas

Cultural and seasonal festivals

- Highlight local traditions, food, music, or art in ways that invite people of all backgrounds to join in.

Group physical activities and recreation programs

- Organize walks, bike rides, fitness classes, recreation programs, or community sports activities.

Volunteer service events

- Neighborhood clean-ups, garden workdays, and donation drives bring residents together around a shared purpose.

Arts and creative events

- Host art projects, mural days, craft nights, or open-mic gatherings that encourage participation.

Intergenerational and youth activities

- Create opportunities for youth, adults, and older adults to connect through storytelling, mentoring, or shared activities.

Community meals

- Block parties, potlucks, or food-truck roundups create relaxed environments for conversation and connection.

Adaptive recreation opportunities

- Provide inclusive recreation activities and events that support residents of all ages and abilities.

Skill-Building Programs

Strong social connection doesn't just depend on places and events. It also relies on people having the confidence and skills to build relationships, communicate effectively, and participate in community life. Many residents want to connect but may feel unsure, isolated, or out of practice.

Cities and towns can play a meaningful role by offering programs that help people learn and engage more comfortably with others. Skill-building programs can support residents of all ages—from youth building friendships and leadership skills to older adults learning digital tools to stay connected.

Examples



The **Cedar City Youth Council (CCYC)** is open to high school students who live in Cedar City and are interested in government, service, and leadership who would like to get involved in their local community. CCYC members learn about city management, meet elected officials, and participate in local service projects.



The **Millcreek Promise Program** is a community-wide initiative that brings together the City of Millcreek, United Way of Salt Lake, local leaders, residents, and partners to support the success of youth and families. It focuses on three key areas—education, health and safety, and economic well-being—to help ensure all Millcreek residents have the support and opportunities they need to thrive.

Intervention Ideas

Workshops and classes

- Offer sessions on communication, conflict resolution, relationship skills, and community engagement.

Youth and teen programs

- Provide opportunities for youth to build confidence, practice leadership, and develop social and teamwork skills through structured programs and mentorship.

Digital literacy support

- Help older adults and newcomers learn how to use technology to stay connected, access services, and participate in community life.

Volunteer and leadership training

- Equip residents with skills to organize projects, lead initiatives, and engage others in community efforts.

Language and cultural learning

- Offer English classes, conversational groups, and cultural-exchange programs that bring diverse residents together.

Health and wellness programs

- Provide group-based workshops on topics like chronic disease management, parenting, or stress management that also build peer support and connection.

Opportunities for Virtual Connection

Even in connected communities, not everyone can attend in-person events or gather easily. Illness, caregiving responsibilities, limited transportation, work schedules, or mobility challenges can all make it harder for residents to participate. Virtual options help bridge those gaps—allowing people to connect, learn, and engage from wherever they are.

By offering accessible digital opportunities, cities and towns can help residents stay informed, build relationships, and feel part of community life, even when they can't be there in person.

Examples



Provo City offers a Digital Inclusion Program. Residents can access free Wi-Fi at all city government locations, utilize public computer labs, check out a laptop, and take free digital literacy classes. The goal is to ensure all residents can access the technology needed to participate fully in work, school, and daily life.



St. George offers a virtual New Year's Day run. Participants can choose their own route to run and receive a t-shirt and digital finisher's medal and bib for participating. It is a fun way to organize a community event without worrying about the cost of crowd control and logistics.

Intervention Ideas

Online community events

- Virtual town halls, workshops, performances, book clubs, or discussion groups.

Hybrid meetings and activities

- Combine in-person and online participation so more residents can join.

Digital community hubs

- Create or enhance platforms where residents can find events, connect with neighbors, volunteer, or access local resources.

Livestreamed civic meetings

- Allow residents to watch or participate in council meetings, planning sessions, and public forums remotely.

Virtual recreation programs

- Online fitness classes, art lessons, gaming groups, or hobby clubs.

Technology assistance

- Provide digital-literacy classes, “tech help” hours at libraries, or loaner devices (tablets, hotspots) for those without reliable access.

Community Resources

These resources help communities plan and implement effective social connection efforts that strengthen relationships, build community cohesion, and improve overall well-being.

Crisis Support & Helpline

- [988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#)
- [Utah Lifeline](#)

National Strategies & Policy Frameworks

- [Framework for a National Strategy to Advance Social Connection](#)
- [Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation](#)
- [Promising Approaches to Promote Social Connection](#)
- [Reducing Social Isolation Across the Lifecourse](#)

Community & Local Implementation

- [Commit to Connect](#)
- [Real Day Campaign](#)
- [5 Proven Ways to Build Social Connections in Your Community](#)
- [Connect2Tools to Overcome Social Isolation](#)
- [Building Connections Fund Co-Design and Community Spaces](#)

Campaigns & Public Awareness

- [Let's Plant the Seeds of Change](#)

Education, Youth & Family Engagement

- [Youth Mental Health and Well-being in Faith and Community Settings: Practicing Connectedness](#)
- [Pediatrics Supporting Parents](#)
- [Family Engagement Toolkit](#)

Community Resources

Individual & Personal Well-Being

- Loneliness and Social Isolation – Tips for Staying Connected
- Social Wellness Toolkit
- Nurture Connection
- Experience the Power of Social Connectedness

Research & Measurement

- Assessment of Social Isolation and Loneliness Research
- A Guide to Measuring Loneliness for Community Organizations
- Socially Connected Communities – Solutions for Social Isolation
- Social Connection In Everyday Spaces– (Milovan Savic et al.)

Utah & State-Specific Resources

- Is Social Disconnection Comparable to Smoking? | Julianne Holt-Lunstad | TEDxBYU
- One Kind Act A Day
- Utah Health Improvement Plan
- Utah DHHS CHAT Campaign

