



UNITED WAY
Northeastern
Minnesota

Youth United
CONTEST

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The biggest need facing the communities of Northeastern Minnesota today is the widening skilled trades gap. This issue is a foundational challenge that undermines the economic stability of the Iron Range. As our experienced generation of mechanics, welders, and heavy equipment technicians retire, there are simply not enough qualified young professionals to maintain the operations on the Iron Range; like mining and mine suppliers. This shortage threatens to slow down production, raise costs for local businesses and lose community members. Without a robust pipeline of skilled trades workers, the Iron Range cannot innovate or sustain its crucial economic activities.

The impact of this shortage is noticeable. There is deferred infrastructure maintenance forcing businesses to contract work from outside the Iron Range; versus investing locally. For many in our community, a high-paying, stable career is not promoted in the trades but instead in four year colleges. This stops community infrastructure and economic mobility of younger generations. I feel there needs to be more effort to reframe the perception of trade careers, provide more hands-on training resources while in high school, and ensure there is financial access for those pursuing this path.

My perspective on this challenge is deeply personal and proactive. I have chosen to confront the trades gap by enrolling in the Diesel Mechanics/Heavy Equipment Maintenance AAS program at MN North College through PSEO for immediate, hands-on career preparation versus a traditional four year route. My passion for dirt track racing and my success turning small engine repairs into over \$5,000 in sales confirm the rewards and fulfillment found in mastering a trade. I see my AAS degree and CDL as my commitment to being a part of the solution.

My mom has taught me a lot about the United Way and Northland Foundation because she feels they are important supports to rural infrastructure. I think the United Way can play a transformative role by investing in high school and college education that supports and promotes the trades industry on the Iron Range. The United Way could establish a Trades Scholarship Fund. A fund specifically designated for students in programs like Diesel Mechanics, Welding, Engineering, and Electrical Technology would incentivize students to pursue careers on the Iron Range. This would not only provide financial support but send a clear message that the community values and requires these specific skills.

I also feel the United Way would be an excellent organization to lead a Community Awareness and Career Reframing Campaign. The United Way could showcase the high salaries, stability, and technological complexity of modern trade careers right here on the Iron Range versus the outdated notion that trades are a secondary option.

In conclusion, the trades gap is the critical issue defining the future sustainability of Northeastern Minnesota. By investing in targeted scholarships and leading a campaign to reframe career paths, the United Way can secure the long-term economic sustainability of our rural region.

BRANT GRUBA
Rock Ridge High School