



**UNITED WAY**  
Northeastern  
Minnesota

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**CONTEST**

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In the words of Leslie Knope from the American sitcom Parks and Recreation, “I love parks. I don’t know if that’s something I’ve communicated before.” While I may not share all of Leslie Knope’s enthusiasm, I do believe parks play an important role in a healthy community. However, in my community, parks are often underused. The biggest challenge I see in my community is the lack of engagement within the parks. In order to best understand why this is important for my community, we need to discuss the benefits of parks, the reasons they are empty, and how United Way of Northeastern Minnesota (UWNEMN) can address this challenge.

Parks are the living rooms of our towns. They provide free, accessible outdoor spaces, where people can gather and relax. In conversations about community and well-being, there is often discussion of the need for more “third spaces” – spaces to exist outside of the home and school/work (Jordan, 2024). Parks have the potential to serve this role at no cost. In Northeastern Minnesota, there are many opportunities to enjoy the outdoors, such as hiking, skiing, biking, or snowmobiling. However, many of these activities require equipment, transportation, or fees that may make them inaccessible. Parks offer an alternative: outdoor spaces located directly in town and open to all. Spaces like these, when taken advantage of, lead to reduced stress, anxiety, and reduced risk of obesity and cardiovascular disease (Foderaro & Klein, 2023). In communities like mine, parks hold potential to improve lives, but only if we choose to value them.

Beyond accessibility, parks encourage community connection. During warmer months, I often do my homework in a local park. Though it is usually quiet, the interactions I do have are meaningful. Further, parks act as an environment for groups to come together (Dolesh, 2010). My own experiences and those of people across the country are proof of parks’ social necessity. The benefits of parks, both physical and social, are real, and if more people valued them, we would see these benefits flourish in our communities.

If parks offer so many benefits, why do they remain so empty? In my community, two major factors contribute to this issue: a lack of activities and seasonal barriers. Many parks are perceived as boring, with little to do when you arrive. When parks lack programs or a clear purpose, people struggle to see a reason to visit. During the colder months, this problem becomes more pronounced. The weather discourages people from spending time outdoors. While it is often said that “a walk in the park is free,” that idea becomes less appealing when temperatures are low. Few activities tied with the cold weather do not make good selling points for parks.

Although this challenge is significant, it is not without solutions. There are several acts that UWNEMN and similar organizations can take to address this problem. One way to engage in this issue is through holding small, community-based events in underused parks. These events do not need to be large or expensive. Simple gatherings, such as community picnics in warmer months or winter activity days where people build snowmen and play games, could encourage residents to see parks as an engaging space year-round. In times when people see no reason to show up, organizations such as UWNEMN can create a reason. Accessibility should also be considered. For individuals who lack transportation, event organizers could coordinate rides with existing transit options.

Events are not the only way to benefit the parks; outreach and education are equally important. Through campaigns and messaging, parks can be promoted differently to different age groups. Need a place to take your kids at no cost? Go to the park. Are social activities too expensive? Parks are a no-cost alternative. You can't find a place to work out? Go to your nearest park.

Finally, seasonal barriers cannot go unaddressed. In colder months, some community members may lack appropriate winter clothing. A clothing drive or winter gear program supported by organizations like UWNEMN could reduce this barrier and make parks more accessible to everyone.

Parks are valuable resources that support physical health, mental well-being, and community connections. One of the greatest challenges my community faces is not the absence of these spaces, but the lack of participation in them. By supporting programming, accessibility, and outreach, United Way of Northeastern Minnesota has an opportunity to help transform underused parks into active, inclusive spaces that better serve the community.

### **Works Cited**

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