



**UNITED WAY**  
Northeastern  
Minnesota

*Youth United*  
**CONTEST**

**2025-2026**

Most of us remember the D.A.R.E. program back in elementary school. But aside from that, few programs on the Iron Range tackle complex subjects such as drugs, alcohol, sex, and other behaviors amongst teens. I have seen firsthand the consequences of risky behaviors among my peers, including classmates who have overdosed on prescription drugs and friends who have been in unhealthy relationships. I also know that there are many alarming statistics such as drug use being a massive risk amongst youth, as stated in a study from UCLA Health, “An average of 22 adolescents, 14 to 18 years of age, died in the U.S. each week in 2022 from drug overdoses, raising the death rate for this group to 5.2 per 100,000– driven by fentanyl in counterfeit pills,…” as well as many other alarming facts and figures regarding sexually transmitted infections in youth and purposeful self-harm driven by mental health issues.

Risky decisions are part of human behavior, and while we can’t always prevent people from putting themselves in harm’s way, we can minimize the consequences through harm-reduction initiatives. A harm-reduction mindset is essential for young people, who often make risky decisions without considering the long-term effects. The challenges youth currently face with increasing mental health concerns and substance abuse show that there needs to be more support and understanding. Implementing harm-reduction initiatives would provide this support with comprehensive education, access to supportive organizations, and safe, nonjudgmental spaces. By supporting programs that provide information and resources to encourage adolescents to make safer, more informed decisions, organizations like United Way can help teens reduce risky behaviors and, consequently, adverse outcomes.

My personal experiences and involvement with harm reduction initiatives have motivated me to advocate for and create additional resources. At my school, I am part of the Creating Our Iron Range Everyday (C.O.R.E.) club, where we provide events for students to participate in, without drugs or alcohol. For example, before homecoming football games, we create a space for students to hang out, play games, and eat as an alternative to going out beforehand and using drugs or alcohol. One of our missions is to promote positive messaging that teens do not need drugs and alcohol to have fun. Along with C.O.R.E., I am part of the Teen Council peer education program at Planned Parenthood in Duluth. As a Teen Council member, I receive training to provide reliable information about reproductive and sexual health that I can share with friends and family, and to teach comprehensive sex education, which most Duluth schools formally request. Peer education breaks down barriers around uncomfortable topics and fosters spaces for more dialogue and understanding. Being part of both C.O.R.E. and Teen Council has shown me that my Iron Range community needs more initiatives that address topics like sex, drugs, and alcohol, which are not talked about enough, and are negatively affecting my peers and me.

United Way of Northeastern MN can provide funding, resources, and logistical support to advance harm reduction initiatives that break down stigma and silence around uncomfortable topics. Community support is essential to create and expand these efforts. Having peer-led leadership and in-depth, comprehensive education in schools to address dangerous behaviors will save lives and protect students. Additionally, supporting educational resources outside of school would increase the community’s understanding of risky

behaviors and harm-reduction initiatives. Family events where youth and adults learn together about complex topics could further prevent negative behaviors and promote risk-reduction dialogue within households. United Way can start sparking these initiatives with support, along with the community engagement it already has. Helping host or fund educational nights or in-school events will empower youth to make decisions based on accurate information and tools, leading to healthier lives and futures.

In my community and many others, there is a need for more support, especially for young people. Introducing initiatives that do not shame or demand absolute abstinence from harmful activities offers more realistic, practical ways to improve outcomes for youth. Harm reduction efforts by local organizations and community members around adolescents in my community will also have a positive impact on their futures and quality of life. Risky behavior among young people on the Iron Range cannot always be stopped, but it can be predicted and prepared for with harm-reduction techniques and strategies.

**Resources:**

<https://www.uclahealth.org/news/release/about-22-high-school-age-adolescents-died-each-week>