

NEWS RELEASE FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Young Professionals Welding & Firefighting Programs Forge Skills, Confidence, and Career Pathways for Local Youth

CADILLAC, MI– The Young Professionals program—an initiative providing work experience, job skills, and career exploration for youth ages 14–24—celebrates a landmark summer of achievement with its 2025 Welding and Firefighting cohorts. Funded by the State of Michigan and delivered in partnership with local school districts, the program connects students with businesses and training in high-demand fields such as welding, construction, IT, and public safety to reduce youth unemployment and build long-term career pathways.

This summer, every single Welding Young Professional, a partnership between **Northwest Michigan Works! Cadillac** and the **Wexford-Missaukee ISD Career Tech Center**, earned at least one *professionally recognized welding certificate*—a powerful credential for future job searches in this high-demand industry. Beyond certifications, students experienced remarkable personal growth.

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“The passion of our instructors created a powerful learning environment,” said student **Carter Helsel**. Classmate **Alizay O’Connell** added, “I was initially worried, but the instructors believed in me and taught me about positivity.” Students reported learning resilience and perseverance: “Just because you don’t get it the first time doesn’t mean you’re dumb,” said **Karalyn Nolan**, while Jessie Harris reflected on the importance of not comparing yourself to others. **Ethan West** summed it up: “There’s always someone better or smarter, so keep learning and asking questions.” Of course, not every lesson was about welding. As student **Alex Bunting** quipped, “Never take bets with Mr. Larkins!”

Meanwhile, the Young Professionals Firefighting work experience, held at the **Wexford-Missaukee Career Technical Center** under instructor **Jason Baughan**, offered high school students a hands-on introduction to public safety careers. Participants learned search and rescue, radio operations in high-pressure situations, and how to navigate tight spaces with full SCBA gear.

“The growth was phenomenal,” said Baughan. “Those who were timid in the first few weeks began to take control of the scenarios. Their confidence greatly improved.” When asked how many were interested in firefighting careers after the program, his answer was simple: “All of them. Some have already been hired.”

Congratulations to these dedicated young professionals already serving our communities:

- **Dawson Dykgraaf** – Paid-on-call Firefighter, Cedar Creek Township FD
- **Ravon Eash**– Paid-on-call Firefighter, Haring Township FD
- **Joe Goslyn** – Fire Cadet, Haring Township FD
- **Katejrah Harsh**– Pursuing a role with the City of Evart FD
- **Bree Kinch** – Paid-on-call Firefighter, City of McBain FD
- **Lily Roque Cruz**– Fire Cadet, City of McBain FD

“These courses taught practical skills, but it clearly also allowed many students to reframe their struggles as surmountable through hard work,” said Youth Career Advisor for

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Northwest Michigan Works!, **Eric VanVleet**. "I think in their own way they showed a lot of heart and vulnerability during their experience at young professionals' summer."

Northwest Michigan Works! extends a heartfelt thank you to **Matt Larkins, Jason Baughan, Kelsie Foreman, and Ben Oliver** for their passion, expertise, and dedication to mentoring and inspiring these young professionals. Their leadership turned hands-on training into life-changing, career-making experiences for youth in our region.

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NOTE to Media: Images are oftentimes available upon request by emailing Dana O'Dell at dana.odell@networksnorthwest.org and stating preferences for resolution, file format, and file size. Or phone (231) 929-5075. Check our online Media Room at networksnorthwest.org/media

Founded in 1974, Networks Northwest facilitates and manages various programs and services for the 10-county region. These programs include Northwest Michigan Works!, APEX Accelerator (formerly PTAC), various business services, and many different regional planning initiatives in response to our communities' requests and needs. You will see the broad spectrum of workforce, business, and community services Networks Northwest offers if you visit our website, networksnorthwest.org. Networks Northwest's member counties are Antrim, Benzie, Charlevoix, Emmet, Grand Traverse, Kalkaska, Leelanau, Manistee, Missaukee, and Wexford.

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