

Empowering Indigenous Communities through the Dakota Prairie Apprenticeship Readiness Program

By: *Allison Balanc*

As National Apprenticeship Week 2024 shines a light on inclusive pathways, we're excited to highlight the [Dakota Prairie Apprenticeship Readiness Program \(DPARP\)](#) — an initiative designed to bridge gaps and create opportunities for Native American communities across the Dakotas. Through collaboration, dedication, and innovative approaches, the program has already shown promise as a model for advancing underrepresented communities in the trades.

Building a Foundation for the Future

DPARP, the first Apprenticeship Readiness Program of its kind in North America, represents a historic partnership between North Dakota's Building Trades Unions and [Nueta Hidatsa Sahnish College](#), a tribal college, aiming to equip Indigenous populations with the skills and confidence to enter building trades. Iman Moore, a tribal member of the Three Affiliated Tribes, and Jason Ehlert, President of North Dakota's Building Trades Unions, have driven this initiative forward to reach individuals on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation and beyond.

Reflecting on her journey, Iman Moore highlights the challenges and motivations that sparked her commitment. "Growing up on the reservation, I saw firsthand the importance of offering pathways for young Natives to see themselves in professional roles," she shares. "Many youth lack exposure to diverse career options, and programs like DPARP are vital in planting those seeds early."

Overcoming Challenges Together

Launching DPARP wasn't without hurdles. Ehlert describes their journey as "building the airplane while flying it," referring to the program's evolution and the ongoing challenges they face, including limited technology access, transportation, and childcare barriers. He emphasized that funding from the [North American Building Trades Unions](#) and the [National Urban League](#) was instrumental in getting the program off the ground, as was the support from TradesFutures, which provided both curriculum and guidance.

Moore added that the delivery of the course remains adaptable and culturally sensitive. "It's crucial to have facilitators who understand and respect Native culture," she says. "Incorporating respect for cultural nuances makes a difference in how we engage and retain students."

Creating Lasting Impact

Since its inception, DPARP has successfully graduated two participants, a significant victory for a program in its early stages. As Ehlert and Moore continue to refine the

curriculum and build relationships with employers, their goal is to produce 40 apprenticeship-ready candidates over the next few years. By partnering with tribal colleges across the Dakotas, they are also expanding DPARP's reach, bringing hope and opportunities to Indigenous communities throughout the Upper Midwest.



Both Ehlert and Moore recognize that the program's impact extends beyond the immediate goals of skill development and career placement. They see DPARP as a pathway to economic empowerment, with the potential for graduates to create businesses and even address construction shortages on reservations.

A Model for the Future

Through DPARP, the team is not only preparing candidates for the trades but also fostering a deeper understanding of union values, construction math, and safe working practices. As Moore notes, the program offers participants an invaluable opportunity to experience what it takes to succeed in the trades, with the freedom to make an informed choice about whether the path is right for them.

With partnerships and commitments growing, Ehlert and Moore remain optimistic about DPARP's future and the doors it will open for Native Americans in the building trades.