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*The National Grant Program of the AgrAbility Project is a joint effort of*

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University of Wisconsin-Cooperative Extension

Easter Seals

## AgrAbility Staff Work with VR to Assist Nebraska Rancher

Bernard, 53, owns and operates a 1,300-acre ranch in Nebraska on which he raises hay, alfalfa and beef cattle. In September 1999, he was severely burned when his tractor exploded. He was not expected to live. A Nebraska AgrAbility Rural Rehabilitation Specialist met with Bernard and his wife, Cheryl, while he was still an inpatient at a rehabilitation hospital. The couple's goal was to continue ranching, so Nebraska AgrAbility began to work on ways to enable them to do so. With iron determination, Bernard fought through numerous surgeries and long, painful rehabilitation to return home to his family and the work he loves.

Bernard's ability to operate his ranch is limited by his greatly reduced strength and stamina, low tolerance for extreme temperatures, reduced range of motion, and extreme sensitivity to the sun and skin irritants.

One of the main problems identified through the AgrAbility farm site assessment was Bernard's inability to irrigate the alfalfa field using his existing system, which had to be taken apart, lifted, moved across the field and reassembled. He had to rely on others to move the pipe for him.

AgrAbility staff worked with Bernard to identify an irrigation method that

would enhance water usage practices and accommodate his limitations. A traveling gun sprinkler seemed to be one solution.

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A traveling gun sprinkler allows Bernard to irrigate his crops without needing assistance to move an irrigation pipe.

## Vocational Rehabilitation Services Benefit AgrAbility Clients

### Background

On June 20, 1920, the first Vocational Rehabilitation Act was signed into law to support veterans with disabilities from World War I who needed assistance to find gainful employment. Over the years, this program has been modified to encompass the growing needs of all people with disabilities who choose assistance to help them return to work. Congress provides nearly \$2.4 billion in funding annually to the states through the Vocational Rehabilitation system (VR) to support employment and training programs. Today, the state VR programs are funded with 80% federal dollars and a match of 20% state dollars. The federal grants are allocated to states through the United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services Administration (OSERS) to operate a comprehensive Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

### State VR Programs

Each state has a VR program created to assist eligible individuals with disabilities to prepare for and engage in gainful employment and meaningful careers. VR program staff, subcontractors and vendors assess client needs and abilities, help clients set goals, develop a plan to meet needs and goals, and provide or arrange for services necessary for clients to achieve their goals. To avoid duplication of services, VR counselors may also make referrals to other state service departments that offer service to individuals with disabilities.

Other departments that may have services available for persons with disabilities are

- (a) Independent Living Center Services,
- (b) State Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired,
- (c) State Employment Agency and
- (d) Social Security Administration.

### Eligibility Requirements

To be eligible for VR services, an individual must:

- (a) have a physical or mental impairment, which constitutes or results in a substantial impediment to employment;
- (b) be unable to independently prepare for, secure, retain or regain employment; and
- (c) benefit from VR services to achieve an employment outcome.

Services are available through an “order of selection” process. This means that individuals with the most significant disabilities are given priority over those with less significant disabilities. Such ranking is necessary because states often have insufficient resources to serve all individuals who are eligible. States have some latitude, however, in defining other eligibility criteria (e.g., qualifying level of economic need). Funding levels for VR services also vary from state to state. Some states allocate substantially more funds to the program than others, which in turn affects the actual dollars in the 80% federal match and the total state budget.

**For contact information for your state VR see:**  
<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/RSA/Resources/State/index.html>

**Focus**

**Vocational Rehabilitation Services**

**SSDI and SSI Benefits**

Recipients of Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) Benefits (a federal insurance program for workers who become unable to work) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) Benefits (a federal cash assistance program for aged and disabled people who have limited income and resources) are eligible for VR services, unless their disabilities are so substantial that the individuals cannot benefit from the VR services available.

**For more information on SSDI and SSI Benefits, contact your local Social Security office or see their web site at <http://ssa.gov/disability>.**

**How to Apply for Services**

Individuals who qualify for and wish to receive VR services must submit a written application requesting those services. The VR application contains the information necessary for VR personnel to determine if the individual is eligible for VR services. The VR staff also need to obtain a written consent from the client to exchange his or her information with other professionals and to obtain the client's medical records. VR has 60 days after receipt of the application to determine whether an individual is eligible for services.

VR services include

- (a) vocational tests and assessments;
- (b) vocational and guidance counseling;
- (c) training, on-the-job training, and job coaching;
- (d) school-to-work transition and planning for students;
- (e) information on assistive technology (AT) or funding assistance for a vendor to conduct an assistive technology assessment and to make recommendations for modifications and/or devices;
- (f) funding to help pay for assistive technology;
- (g) funds to help pay tuition or other college needs;
- (h) supported employment; and
- (i) job search, resume writing, and placement services.

With input from the client, VR staff determine the types of services that are most suitable for the client. A VR counselor assists the client in writing a rehabilitation plan that identifies the client's vocational goal and the VR services and funding that are available to attain that goal.

All VR staff services are free of charge, although, based on income, some clients may be asked to cost share for the purchase of needed equipment or modifications. Each state VR has its own funding criteria for clients whose plan includes obtaining assistive technology. Availability of funds for recommended assistive technology, however, varies depending on the counselor's individual caseload and budget, caps on funds for worksite accommodations, and lack of or excess of end of fiscal year funds. If there is a waiting list for assistance, the client's rank on the list is also a factor in whether enough funds remain to help him or her.

**Focus**

**Vocational Rehabilitation Services**

**Client Assistance Program**

Each state also has a Client Assistance Program (CAP) available under VR. The CAP is a client advocacy program whose staff can answer questions about VR services and provide appropriate remedies to ensure that the client's rights to services and benefits are protected under law.

A state by state listing of Client Assistance Programs can be found at <http://www.nau.edu/natcap/resource2.html>

**Working Together**

Historically speaking, VR counselors have assisted a predominantly urban population. Therefore, VR counselors are sometimes at a loss when it comes to identifying ways to help people with disabilities engaged in agriculture or agriculture-related areas stay gainfully employed. State AgrAbility staff, however, have the special expertise to provide those services to farmers, ranchers, and rural or other farm workers who have disabilities.

Although state AgrAbility staff can identify ways agricultural workers with disabilities can get back to work, the AgrAbility Project does not have the funds to help purchase the needed equipment or recommended modifications. This creates an excellent opportunity for state AgrAbility staff to work in collaboration with VR counselors to make use of all existing resources. In fact, nearly all state AgrAbility Projects make referrals to and receive referrals from VR.

The collaborative nature of VR and the state AgrAbility Projects is a win-win scenario for farmers, ranchers, and rural or other farm workers who have disabilities. As funding sources for assistive technology or equipment modifications come and go, it will be increasingly important that state AgrAbility Projects continue to foster this excellent working relationship with the state VR staff.



Cindy Hinrichs, Nebraska AgrAbility, and Dennis Ford, Kansas VR, meet with a client.

## Client Feature

### AgrAbility Staff Work with VR to Assist Nebraska Rancher

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The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff was contacted for input and expertise on the conservation issues pertaining to Bernard's fields and irrigation needs. After a property evaluation and inventory, an NRCS conservationist agreed that a traveling gun sprinkler system would provide more efficient and effective use of water resources.

Due to budget limitations, however, VR could only cover a portion of the traveling sprinkler system costs. Additional funds were needed. Traditional NRCS cost-share funds were sought first. The 15% funding available in Bernard's county would not be available until one year after modification recommendations were made.

Waiting for this potential assistance was not an option because he could not afford to lose another irrigation season. Further cost analysis determined that without assistance in addition to the amount offered by VR, Bernard would not be able to afford to convert to the traveling sprinkler system even though it would enhance his water usage practices as well as lessen the impact of his disability.

AgrAbility staff and Nebraska NRCS wrote a joint grant proposal to establish a Community Assistance and Rural Development Division (CARD) funding source. These grant funds, which are designed to address conservation issues in conjunction with accommodating a disability, are administered through a grant set aside for Nebraska AgrAbility, and are available only after traditional funding sources have been exhausted. With a combination of producer, VR and CARD funds, the traveling sprinkler system was purchased and the irrigation conversion project was put into place.

A lack of cabs in Bernard's equipment to protect him from the climate presented a second problem. Trading equipment was not feasible at that time; he needed funding assistance to help modify his current equipment. AgrAbility staff contacted Nebraska Vocational Rehabilitation Service (VR). Bernard and AgrAbility staff worked closely with the assigned VR counselor to educate the counselor about agriculture and worksite modifications. AgrAbility staff advocacy resulted in the VR team determining that Bernard's vocational needs were real and his goals feasible. VR committed to providing financial support to purchase

sun canopies and cooling vests to accommodate his needs.

Because of cold intolerance, Bernard was unable to safely and comfortably complete livestock care and handling duties during the first winter of his recovery. Fortunately, during that winter, new tax legislation was passed that allowed ranchers to sell cattle without tax ramifications. The only stipulation was that the cattle had to be replaced within the following year. Bernard sold his livestock, avoided tax liabilities, and eliminated the dangers and discomfort of livestock handling during his first year of recovery.

When asked about his experience with AgrAbility, Bernard said, "If it hadn't have been for the help of AgrAbility and Voc Rehab, I wouldn't have been able to do what I am doing now and what I anticipate doing in the future. You have made my life easier. I do more of the things I like [to do] and can do because of the help you provided. I am so thankful."

**State Project**

**Nebraska**

**Comprehensive, Person-Centered Service Delivery Characterizes Nebraska AgrAbility**

Nebraska AgrAbility is a cooperative program of the University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension and Easter Seals Nebraska that responds to the functional, financial and emotional needs of Nebraska's farmers and ranchers with disabilities and their family members. Since 1995, Nebraska AgrAbility has been assisting the state's farmers and ranchers with disabilities to continue to work safely, profitably and efficiently, despite the challenges of permanent disabilities.

Nebraska AgrAbility's work is based on the service philosophy that all Nebraska AgrAbility customers should have complete and accurate information about the full array of support that have been created to help them achieve functional and economic independence. Nebraska AgrAbility's services include:

**Assessment** - initial needs assessment and work site evaluation.

**Information and Referral** - how to access other systems for vocational evaluation, and assistance in securing alternative employment or home modifications.

**Financial Services** - technical assistance with Social Security disability benefit programs, work incentive assistance, Medicare and Medicaid eligibility or farm business analysis.

**Assistive Technology Services** - information about rehabilitation technology, funding coordination, and equipment and equipment modifications.

**Support Services** - case management and services coordination, advocacy with state and federal agencies and peer support connections with other producers who have similar circumstances.

Nebraska AgrAbility has been recognized regionally and nationally for using Social Security disability benefit and work incentive programs for farmers and ranchers with disabilities. The recent Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999 is a major federal initiative that should offer new opportunities to Nebraska's farmers and ranchers with disabilities. Nebraska AgrAbility is refining the service delivery methodology to make this new federal program available in a way that is sensitive to the functional, economic and cultural realities of Nebraska crop and livestock production.



Repair and maintenance of machinery has always been important to Roger Harms. He wanted to be able to utilize tools and devices after the loss of a hand as a result of a farm injury. Nebraska AgrAbility staff helped Roger analyze which of the Assistive Devices of Texas tools he would most frequently use. Roger received VR funding that covered part of the cost of the tools.

**State Project**

**Nebraska**

**Nebraska AgrAbility Staff**



**Rebecca Koehler** has served Nebraska AgrAbility as Project Director since its beginning in 1995. Koehler’s role with the project has included direct service delivery for AgrAbility customers and overall project coordination. Through Koehler’s leadership, the Nebraska AgrAbility team has achieved recognition for expertise in maximizing Social Security Disability and Work Incentive Programs for farmers and ranchers with disabilities. Koehler, her husband, Larry, and Larry’s family operate a corn, soybean and beef operation in south central Nebraska.



**Cindy Hinrichs** serves as Nebraska AgrAbility’s Rural Rehabilitation Specialist. Hinrichs works intensively with Nebraska’s farmers, ranchers and their family members to meet their individual needs. Hinrichs worked as a case manager in Nebraska’s behavioral health system for 9 years before joining the Nebraska AgrAbility team. In her spare time, she raises and sells Quarter horses, farms and runs a grain bin and building construction business with her husband, Scott.



**Renee Fitzke**, Program Support Manager, has been with Nebraska AgrAbility since 1998. Fitzke coordinates the day-to-day operation of the AgrAbility office, providing information and referral, managing service delivery and quality assurance information, developing and maintaining database systems, coordinating educational events like Husker Harvest Days and the annual Spring Workshop, writing the newsletter, and leading the Nebraska AgrAbility Peer Network Steering Committee. She also teaches English at Central Community College in Grand Island.



**Dr. Roger Selley** currently serves as AgrAbility’s Project Director for the University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension. Selley is Extension Farm Management Specialist for the University of Nebraska South Central Research & Extension Center and has provided farm financial consultation for Nebraska AgrAbility since December of 1997.



**Rod Peterson** is new to the Nebraska AgrAbility project. Rod is serving as a Rural Rehabilitation Specialist. His background is in education and agriculture. He and his wife, Susan, have recently moved to the Doniphan area. Susan is a Clinical Nurse Executive at Grand Island Veterans Home. They have three adult daughters and four grandchildren. Rod’s hobbies are fishing, golfing and playing with the grandkids.

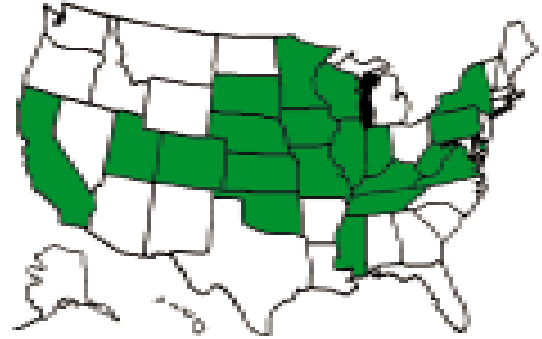
For more information on Nebraska AgrAbility see their web site at <http://www.ianr.unl.edu/agrability>.

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## Resources

### AgrAbility Projects Announced for 2002

USDA CSREES announced 17 new AgrAbility Projects awarded under a competitive request for proposals. AgrAbility Projects for 2002-2006 were awarded to:



**California** - University of California Cooperative Extension, Easter Seals Superior California

**Colorado** - Colorado State University Extension Service, Easter Seals Colorado

**Delaware** - University of Delaware and Maryland Extension Service, Easter Seals Delaware, Delaware State University, University of Maryland Eastern Shores

**Illinois** - University of Illinois Extension Service, Easter Seals Central Illinois

**Indiana** - Purdue University Extension Service, Southern Indiana Center for Independent Living

**Iowa** - Iowa State University Extension, Easter Seals Iowa

**Kansas** - Kansas State University Cooperative Extension, Southeast Kansas Independent Living Center

**Kentucky** - University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service, Cardinal Hill Rehabilitation Hospital

**Minnesota** - University of Minnesota Extension Service, Goodwill/Easter Seals Minnesota

**Nebraska** - University of Nebraska Extension Service, Easter Seals Nebraska

**New York** - Cornell Cooperative Extension, Finger Lakes Occupational Health Services, New York Center for Agriculture Medicine and Health

**Oklahoma** - Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma Assistive Technology Foundation, Langston University

**Pennsylvania** - Pennsylvania State University Extension Service, Easter Seals Central Pennsylvania

**South Dakota** - South Dakota State University Extension Service, Easter Seals South Dakota, Avera Health System

**Utah** - Utah State University Extension Service, Options for Independent Living

**Virginia** - Virginia Cooperative Extension, Easter Seals Virginia

**Wisconsin** - University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension, Easter Seals Wisconsin

AgrAbility projects previously awarded for 2001-2005 are:

**Mississippi** - Mississippi State University Extension Service, T.K. Martin Center for Technology and Disability, Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services

**Missouri** - University of Missouri Extension Service, Services for Independent Living, Lincoln University

**Tennessee** - University of Tennessee Extension Service, Easter Seals Tennessee, Tennessee State University

**West Virginia** - West Virginia University Cooperative Extension, North West Virginia Center for Independent Living

The **AgrAbility Project** promotes success in agriculture for individuals with disabilities and their families through on-site assistance and educational resources. For additional information on the **National AgrAbility Project** or for a current list of state project sites, addresses and telephone numbers contact:

**University of Wisconsin - Cooperative Extension**  
**460 Henry Mall**  
**Madison, WI 53706**  
**866-259-6280 or 608-262-5166**

**Easter Seals**  
**700 Thirteenth St., NW-Suite 200**  
**Washington, DC 20005**  
**800-914-4424 or 202-347-3066**

<http://www.agrabilityproject.org>

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