

# AGRABILITY QUARTERLY



*Promoting Success in Agriculture for People with Disabilities and Their Families*

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

The USDA Cooperative  
State Research, Education  
and Extension Service

University of Wisconsin-  
Cooperative Extension

Easter Seals, Inc.

## The National AgrAbility Project

On a daily basis, National AgrAbility Project (NAP) receives calls and web requests for technical assistance or support from a wide variety of individuals and organizations. If a request comes from someone in a state that has an AgrAbility project, NAP tries to assist and also forwards that referral to the state AgrAbility staff. If the request comes from a non-AgrAbility funded state, NAP staff provides assistance but often never finds out if that assistance was helpful.

One story, however, is worth telling because a particular farmer had a neighbor who did keep in touch with NAP staff. The following story illustrates how the power of a farmer's resolve, the strength of the AgrAbility service delivery process and network, and a caring community can make a difference in a seemingly insurmountable situation.

### A Community Comes Together

Gary Wical, an Ohio farmer and Vietnam War veteran, and his wife, Nelle, have been raising corn, soybeans, wheat and hogs for more than thirty years on a rented farmstead. In February 2007, Gary sustained a traumatic injury when his pant leg was caught in a PTO driveline, resulting in a bilateral above-the-knee amputation. While Gary was still in the hospital, Gregg Sparks, Gary's neighbor, began organizing friends and neighbors to help him. Before long, Gregg had amassed a team of forty neighbors united in a single mission: Get Gary back to farming. A committee formed and fund-raising events were planned by neighbors, the fire department, a local fertilizer and seed company, county Beef and Pork Producers, and the Wical's church. With a strong support system in place, Gregg and a small workgroup began researching where to find help for Gary.

One neighbor had a friend in Kentucky who had lost a leg and he suggested contacting the AgrAbility project and 'a guy in Indiana' who knows all about farming with a disability.

An Internet search brought Gregg Sparks to the NAP website. In mid March, Gregg contacted Mary Beck, rural rehabilitation specialist for NAP. After speculating that lifts for farm vehicles and an all terrain wheelchair might be useful accommodations for Gary, Mary connected Gregg with Mark Novak, NAP agricultural technologist and engineer. Mark provided Gregg with several resources related to lifts, all terrain wheelchairs and more. He also gave Gregg

## Client Story

## Gary Wical

contact information for Life Essentials and its owner, Hubert Von Holten, 'who was that guy in Indiana.' Mary suggested Gary apply for services with the Ohio Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agency as soon as possible. She explained the mission and services of the VR agency and gave him contact information for his local VR office.

Mary further emphasized that VR may be able to provide disability-related assistive technology to accommodate workplace barriers. Mary described the Amputee Coalition's peer support program as well as the Ohio extension service for agriculture-related resources.

Fortunately, Gary was already connected to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) system because he had served in Vietnam.

Meanwhile, Gregg and other neighbors began assessing Gary's farm operation, trying to identify the resources and assistive technology Gary might need to continue farming. A few weeks later, Gregg talked to a Greene County, Ohio State University (OSU) extension agent who mentioned Purdue's Breaking New Ground (BNG) program. Steve Swain at BNG sent Gregg several resources and a copy of BNG's Toolbox, which Gregg then used to organize his assessment process. Hubert Von Holten, from Life Essentials, visited Gary in mid-April. He and Gary had a useful and encouraging conversation despite the frank discussion about what Gary may not be able to do anymore. Gary's decision to discontinue the hog operation was reinforced during their conversation.

Gary's road to recovery and return to farming has not been smooth. He missed part of spring planting in late April when a staph infection landed him back in the hospital. The infection also delayed getting his prosthesis. The local VA was very helpful in acquiring the prosthetic when Gary was ready. They assisted

Gary and Nelle in applying for the VA's Millennium Bill Emergency Coverage for veterans who are treated in a private facility and do not have health insurance.

Gary's in-laws, Rick and Chris Ankeney, bought him a used Kubota 4x4 for farm mobility and his son modified it with hand controls. Gary says that with a slide board he can transfer from his wheelchair to the utility vehicle with relative ease. The Kubota has been invaluable in helping Gary get around his farmstead.

During June and July, Gary met with Jackie Givens, an Ohio VR counselor. In addition to completing the BNG agricultural worksite assessment, Gregg and his workgroup provided Jackie with information about farming with an amputation, fabricated

and commercial lifts, all terrain and outdoor powered wheel chairs, power hitching systems, plus cost estimates and potential vendor resources for each piece of equipment. These resources were obtained from the NAP website and from BNG's Plowshares. Gary's VR plan included the purchase of a portable lift for his truck, hand controls for several vehicles, and a journeyman scooter. The engineer VR contracted to design the hand controls found information on hand



**Gary and Nelle Wical with neighbor, Gregg Sparks (front).**

**Client Story**

**Gary Wical**

control modifications on the NAP website useful as he prepared his designs. Jackie Givens said it was a pleasure to work with Gary and she was very impressed with the tremendous amount of work Gary and his family and friends had done.

More setbacks hit Gary and Nelle in August, when they learned that the home they had rented for more than thirty years was sold. They turned this setback into an opportunity to accelerate a dream of owning their own home. Gary and Nelle decided to build an accessible home on property they purchased more than two years ago. If the winter is favorable, the house should be ready by the beginning of 2008.

The committee to get Gary back to farming mushroomed to eighty neighbors and relatives, who managed to raise \$73,000. Because VR was able to purchase the necessary farm accommodations, the committee gave Gary

“Gary has been helping people for years and has continued, even from his hospital bed. It was easy to get people behind this effort as simple payback for a great friend and neighbor. We just leveraged the information from AgrAbility to point us in the right direction.”  
 -Gary’s neighbor, Gregg Sparks

and Nelle the money to use as needed. Nelle says that all “the neighbors and even strangers have been so nice. God still has a purpose for Gary or he wouldn’t be here. I can’t believe his attitude, either. I don’t think I would have been this strong.”

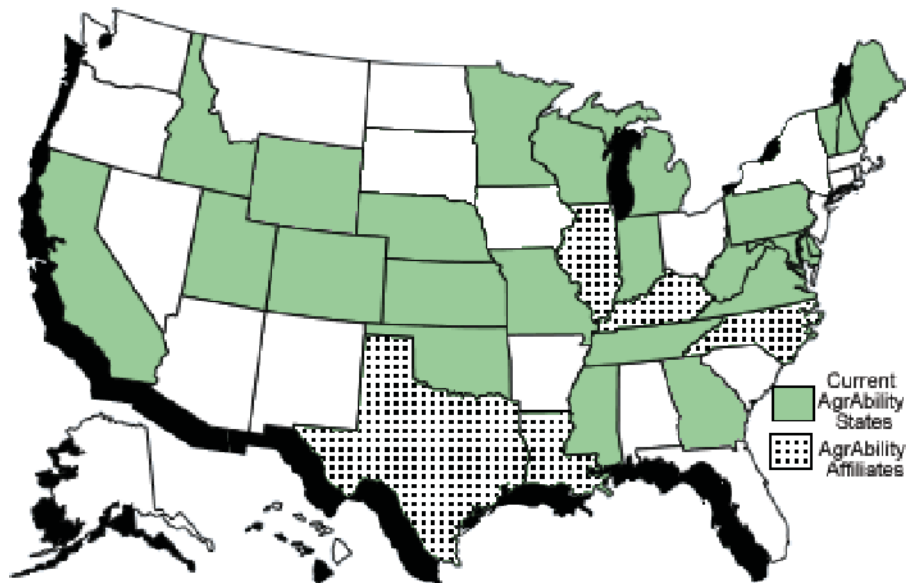
This farmer’s resolve, the resources and network that make up AgrAbility, and the caring and powerful family and community surrounding the Wical’s have helped make it easier for Gary to continue farming. ❖

**Focus**

**National AgrAbility Project**

**National AgrAbility Project**

AgrAbility, at both the state and national levels, brings the knowledge and expertise of agricultural and disability professionals together to assist the farmer, rancher, farm worker or family member with a disability to remain employed in production agriculture.



Current AgrAbility funded states are solidly-shaded, and AgrAbility affiliates are dotted.

The AgrAbility Project was established in the 1990 Farm Bill, and is administered by the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES) at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Today there are twenty-one USDA funded state projects in twenty-two states, and more than 150 staff members. AgrAbility affiliates, formerly funded by USDA, continue to provide limited services in five states. Each USDA funded project is a partnership between a land grant university cooperative extension and a disability services organization, such as:

- **Easter Seals Affiliates**
- **Arthritis Foundation Chapters**
- **Vocational Rehabilitation Centers**
- **Independent Living Centers**
- **Assistive Technology Foundations**
- **Centers for People with Disabilities**

The work of NAP is guided by the three grant priorities that the USDA/CSREES has established: education, networking, and assistance. National staff see their role as serving many audiences; state AgrAbility staff who provide direct services to farmers, ranchers and their families with disabilities, service providers across the country, decision makers in agriculture, health, and government programs, and the general public. NAP strives to develop and disseminate pertinent agricultural, technological and disability-related tools, and resources that can be used by any of these audiences to help a farmer remain in agriculture.

### **Building Service Capacity Through Education**

Building service capacity means sharing AgrAbility's mission and the knowledge the project has gained on accommodating disabilities and preventing secondary injuries among agricultural workers to create a greater network that understands and can provide services to our farmers and ranchers with disabilities. Here are a few examples of how NAP has implemented this goal:

Educated health care professionals, specifically occupational and physical therapists, about farming or ranching with a disability, farm culture and values, and available tools, resources and assistive technology that can help a farmer or rancher remain in farming despite a disability:

- Developed an OT/PT training manual for face-to-face training and an online continuing education course with input from state projects. In addition, a workgroup of educators in OT/PT pre-service university programs has formed to develop pre-service university level curricula.
- Assisted eight state projects that have hosted OT/PT training seminars of six hours to two days in duration in 2007.

Educated government service providers:

- Presented at two public hearings of Ticket to Work (TTW) Advisory Panels to inform staff at the Social Security Administration (SSA), TTW and Work Incentives programs about the limitations current work incentives present for farmers on SSA disability benefits who wish to return to work.
- Facilitated discussions and information sharing with Council of State Administrators in Vocational Rehabilitation, Rehabilitation Services Administration, National Association of Workforce Boards, and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Arthritis Council.

Educated agricultural professionals:

- Established a technical committee, "Assistive Technology for Farmers with Disabilities Technology Exchange," in the American Society of Agricultural and Biological Engineers.

**Building Service Capacity Through Networking**

Networking activities foster mutually beneficial relationships between AgrAbility and other national and regional health organizations that are dedicated to helping people affected by disabilities, disease, or chronic conditions, as well as agricultural and trade organizations. Examples of past resource sharing activities are:

- Collaborated with the American Chronic Pain Association to provide free seminars to interested state projects, as well as regularly sharing resources through various communications outlets, such as listservs, newsletters, and web tools.
- Developed recommendations for Durable Medical Equipment Manufacturers and Rehabilitation Engineering Research Centers about secondary injury issues for farmers/ranchers with lower and/or upper extremity amputations and farmers/ranchers using wheelchairs.
- Staffed a booth and presented at numerous conferences and meetings of national health care organizations including American Occupational Therapy Association, United Spinal Association, the American Council of the Blind, and others.
- Convened an annual workgroup of national health care organizations to discuss opportunities for further collaboration and growth in both national and regional chapters.

Building a solid volunteer base and peer support program is another networking activity that can foster a mutually beneficial relationship and build service capacity. National AgrAbility authored a Volunteer Coordinators Manual and, in cooperation with several state projects, piloted a peer support “train the trainer”

workshop and manual. Six states have conducted peer support volunteer trainings thus far.

**Providing Technical Assistance to Farmers/Ranchers and to State AgrAbility Projects**

NAP staff provide consultative services and technical assistance to farmers/ranchers with disabilities, in AgrAbility and non-AgrAbility funded states, to increase the likelihood that they experience success in their farm/ranch operations. NAP typically provides direct assistance through phone inquiries and email requests. Gary Wical’s story is one example of NAP’s direct client assistance to farmers/ranchers. Other examples include information and referral for rehabilitation services, prescription drug assistance, business plan development, and assistive technology and product information.

Services are also provided to other agencies and organizations that provide services and supports for farmers/ranchers with disabilities, such as extension agents, VR counselors, and risk management specialists. As an example, VR counselors in both Montana and Arkansas contacted NAP for assistance with a farm site assessment in their states. NAP staff contacted Colorado and Oklahoma AgrAbility staff who were able to conduct the assessment and help the farmer in a non-AgrAbility funded state. Also, Mark Novak, NAP engineer and agricultural technologist, along with Paul Leverenz of AgrAbility of Wisconsin, were asked to give a two-day training workshop on “how to conduct farm site assessments” for eight rural VR counselors in North Dakota.

NAP offers assistance to state project staff to increase

**Did you know?**

- In 2006-07 Agrability provided onsite assistance to 1,293 farmers and ranchers with disabilities
  - 34% of the disabilities reported were back or joint injuries and arthritis
  - 78% of AgrAbility clients were male and 22 % were female
  - The majority of AgrAbility clients were full-time farmers or ranchers
  - 80% of client disabilities occurred between 1990 and 2007

**Focus**

**National AgrAbility Project**

their knowledge and skills in providing direct education and technical assistance to farmers and ranchers. The national staff uses several avenues to disseminate information and resources:

- Annual National Training Workshop with up to twenty-four sessions in three different topic areas: assistive technology, health/disability, and professional development.
- Farm site assessment training that provides best practices in conducting an assessment.
- AgrAbility listserv which encourages sharing of information.
- Quarterly newsletters that highlight a successful AgrAbility client and AgrAbility’s involvement, that includes either a disability or agriculture focus piece, and an assistive technology fact sheet.
- NAP website ([www.agrabilityproject.org](http://www.agrabilityproject.org)) which consists of an agriculture-related assistive technology searchable database with approximately 950 products, tip sheets, product comparison datasheets, health and disability resources, and more.
- Demographic data for all state projects that reflect the work of AgrAbility nationwide. ❖

**Project Feature**

**NAP**

**Meet Our Staff**

Over the seven years that the University of Wisconsin-Extension (UW) and Easter Seals Headquarters (ES) have collaborated on the National AgrAbility Project grant, NAP has been able to strengthen its staff expertise by employing individuals with experience and academic training in extension, engineering, assistive technology, case management and vocational rehabilitation, agricultural economics and evaluation, marketing and communication, and health care.

**Ronald T. Schuler, PhD, PE**, is a Professor Emeritus with the Biological Systems Engineering Department at UW-Madison. He’s been with the university for twenty-three years, sixteen of which he’s been involved with AgrAbility of Wisconsin. NAP has been fortunate to have Ron as the project leader for the past seven years. Ron was born and raised on a dairy/swine farm in northeastern Wisconsin before pursuing degrees in Mechanical and Agricultural Engineering. Before coming to UW-Madison, he had fourteen years experience at North Dakota State, the University of Minnesota, and the University of Wisconsin-Platteville.

**Douglas B. Carmon** serves as the NAP manager at Easter Seals in Washington, DC. He has been with both Easter Seals and AgrAbility for three years. Doug grew up in Augusta, MO, a rural town of 250 where he worked on neighbors’ farms. Before joining NAP and Easter Seals in 2004, Doug completed eleven years of active duty service in the U.S. Air Force where he served as an education and training director, pre-hospital medicine coordinator, medical service specialist instructor-trainer, and emergency department shift leader. He has a psychology degree from University of Maryland and nursing certification.

**Cheryl Skjolaas** has been program manager at UW-Madison since August, 2000. Cheryl has worked for UW for the past twenty three years, seventeen years with the Biological Systems Engineering Department, UW-Madison. Prior to this she was a 4-H Youth Development agent. Cheryl was raised on a dairy farm in Stoughton, WI. Cheryl has an agricultural education degree from UW-River Falls.

**Mary Beck, MS, LPC**, has been the rural rehabilitation specialist with NAP in Madison, WI since November of 2002. Mary has a Master’s Degree in Rehabilitation Counseling from the UW-Madison. Prior to NAP, Mary

worked for the Wisconsin Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. Past career positions include job developer, rehabilitation counselor, transition specialist, and technical college instructor. Mary is a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) in Wisconsin and a member of the National Rehabilitation Association.

**Mark Novak, PE**, has been with NAP at UW-Madison since July of 2001 as an agricultural engineer. Mark grew up on a dairy farm in Southwest Wisconsin. He graduated with a BS in Agricultural Engineering, and worked five years at International Harvester's Engineering Research Center in Hinsdale, IL. After obtaining an Electrical Engineering degree and ending up in Madison, WI, he developed software/hardware for individuals with disabilities for twelve years while working at the Trace Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

**Kathryn Pereira, MS**, has been the evaluation specialist with NAP at UW-Madison since October 2005. She is an agricultural economist and is trained in survey research, questionnaire design, focus group facilitation, statistical analysis, program evaluation, data management, and farm financial analysis. Before moving to Madison she operated her own organic vegetable farm in New Hampshire.

**Therese Willkomm, PhD, ATP**, has been the assistive technology specialist consultant with NAP for seven years. In 1988 Therese worked with Easter Seals, RESNA and Senator Harkin's office on the 1988 Technology Related Assistance Act, as well as worked on an amendment to the 1989 Farm Bill to provide education and assistance to farmer affected by disabilities; the legislation that has funded what is now called AgrAbility. She holds a BS and MS in Vocational Rehabilitation with an emphasis in rehabilitation engineering and worksite modifications, and a PhD in Rehabilitation Technology from the University of Pittsburgh.

**Taylor McLean, MPS**, is the NAP project coordinator at Easter Seals in Washington, DC. She has been with Easter Seals and AgrAbility for almost a year. Taylor received a BS and MPS from School of Agriculture Life Sciences at Cornell University in International Agriculture and Applied Economics and Management. Before joining the NAP staff she worked for two years as an aquaculture extensionist and environmental educator in West Africa.

**Sherry Liantonio** has been working as the program assistant at UW-Madison for the past three-and-a-half years. Her roles with NAP include program support, maintenance of AgrAbility listservs and toll-free lines, facilitating conference calls and meetings, and planning and implementing the National Training Workshop. Sherry graduated from UW-Madison with a degree in Journalism. Before joining the national team, Sherry worked for the Department of Commerce where she wrote news releases, newsletters, and facilitated website design.

**April Hessenius** just joined NAP staff in November of this year, and is settling into her job as marketing and communications specialist at Easter Seals. April was raised in a farming family on land that has been in her family for over a century. She graduated with a degree in communications from the University of Northern Iowa before moving to Washington to join the NAP team. ❖

## Who Do I Contact If...

<b>Frequently Asked Questions</b>	<b>Contact Person</b>
I am interested in learning more about AgrAbility Project services?	<b>Sherry</b>
I would like to find more information that describes the farmers, ranchers and farmworkers AgrAbility serves?	<b>Kathryn</b>
I have questions about the website content or where to find information on the site?	<b>Mark</b>
I'd like some AgrAbility brochures to pass out at an upcoming event?	<b>April</b>
I need information about adapting equipment or accommodating the limitations of my disability in my agricultural operation?	<b>Mark</b>
I would like to volunteer some of my time to help AgrAbility?	<b>April</b>
I am an AgrAbility staff member and would like suggestions for holding training for occupational and physical therapists in my state?	<b>Mary</b>
I would like to learn more about starting a peer support program?	<b>Taylor</b>
I have an excellent idea for assistive technology which I think should be added to the Agriculture-related Assistive Technology database?	<b>Mark</b>
I am a staff member and want to learn more about the AgrAbility service delivery process and other training resources available from NAP?	<b>Mary</b>
I am a staff member and could use some suggestions on how to maintain client records?	<b>Kathryn</b>
I have a great suggestion for a session at next year's National Training Workshop?	<b>Mary</b>

**NOTE:** Mention or display of a trademark, proprietary product, or firm in text or figures does not constitute an endorsement by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Easter Seals, the University of Wisconsin, or the AgrAbility Project, and does not imply approval to the exclusion of other suitable products or firms.

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, Inc.**

1425 K St., NW, Suite 200  
 Washington, DC 20005  
 800-914-4424 or 202-347-3066

<http://www.agrabilityproject.org>

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