

**Statement by  
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For the National AgrAbility Project  
Before the  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on Agriculture  
Service in the Field: Veteran Contributions to National Food Security**

Chairman Conaway, members of the committee, staff and guests, it is a pleasure and honor to be invited here today to testify about the contributions that the USDA AgrAbility Program has made, and continues to make, to enhance the capacity of veterans, especially those with either visible or invisible service-related disabilities, to contribute to America's food security.

My name is Cindy Chastain. I was raised on an Indiana farm, graduated from Purdue University with an agriculture degree, and at the same time, received my commission in the Army. My goals then included getting as far away from our Indiana farm as possible, so joining the Army helped me accomplish that mission. However, sometime during the next 30-plus years of my military career, I came to the conclusion that I couldn't wait to get back to my rural Indiana community and farm. My last assignment before retirement was a year-long tour of duty in Afghanistan as part of an Indiana National Guard Agribusiness Development Team. Working with Afghan farmers and members of the team on agricultural projects further reinforced my desire to return to the farm. I retired in 2010, moved back to the family farm and eventually went to work as the Veteran Outreach Coordinator for the USDA National AgrAbility Project hosted at Purdue University. I am also currently the President of Chastain Farms, Inc., a corn and soybean farm that has been in my family for eight generations. My husband and I also operate our own small hobby farm near the family farm.

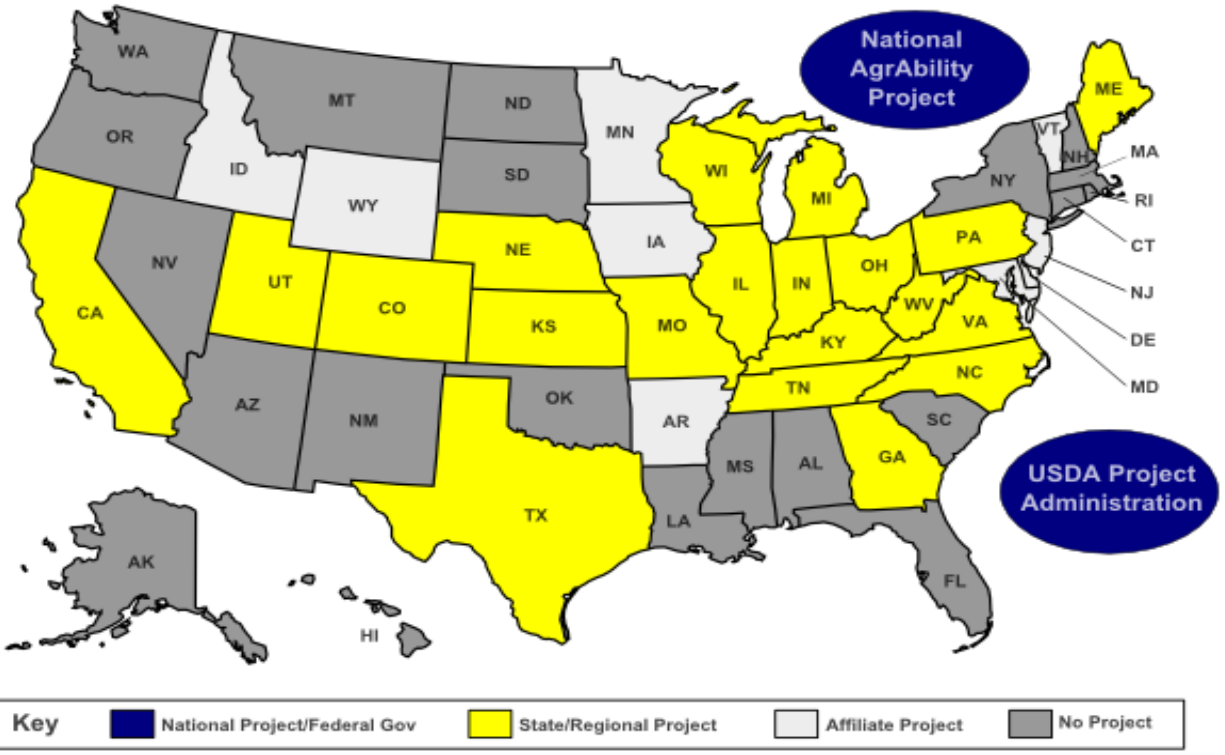
I came to the AgrAbility project less than two years ago and prior to that, had not even heard of the program. However, one of AgrAbility's predecessors, the Breaking New Ground Resource Center within the Department of Agricultural and Biological Engineering at Purdue has been working since 1979 to provide technical assistance to farmers, ranchers, other agricultural workers, and their families who have been impacted by disability and still desire to remain engaged in agricultural production. This mission was carried out as part of Purdue's

Cooperative Extension Service and was from its beginning, national in scope. Many of the first clientele of this program were veterans who had come home to their farms and rural communities with service-related disabilities.

One early client was a disabled World War II Navy veteran who was expanding his New York dairy operation to include blueberry production and needed better ways to improve his mobility both around the dairy farm and blueberry patch. Another client was a Korean War veteran who was trying to find easier ways to accommodate the use of his prosthetic leg in completing farm chores, especially getting on and off his tractor. One early collaborator with the program was Butch Robbins from North Carolina who came back from Vietnam with both legs missing above the knees and an arm amputation at the shoulder after stepping on a land mine. He eventually became a successful custom hay producer, baling tens of thousands of bales of hay annually for his neighbors. Among the veterans the program has recently served is a former Air Force nurse who had served a tour of duty in Iraq, returning with post-traumatic stress. Through encouragement and consultation, she has already earned organic certification for her farm and is continuing to diversify her operation.

Over the past 37 years, the Breaking New Ground Resource Center has served hundreds of veterans, who almost without exception, didn't want a parade, but rather simply wanted the opportunity - and a little technical support - to do what they loved: work the land, grow things and feed their community. Many found that agriculture was not only a means of sustaining themselves, but also a path to recovering some of what was lost or damaged due to their military and combat experiences.

In the 1990 Farm Bill, the Breaking New Ground Outreach Program was used as a model to establish the USDA Technical Assistance Program for Farmers with Disabilities. This program, now known as AgrAbility, is this year celebrating 25 years of service to America's agricultural producers. The program, administered by USDA's National Institute for Food and Agriculture, has grown to include a National AgrAbility Project located at Purdue University, 20 funded state AgrAbility Projects, and several affiliated, unfunded state projects.



As our mission statement says:

*The vision of AgrAbility is to enhance quality of life for farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural workers with disabilities, so that they, their families, and their communities continue to succeed in rural America. For this target audience, "success" may be defined by many parameters, including: gainful employment in production agriculture or a related occupation; access to appropriate assistive technology needed for work and daily living activities; evidence-based information related to the treatment and rehabilitation of disabling conditions; and targeted support for family caregivers of AgrAbility customers.*

The program has worked vigorously for the past 25 years to help make rural America and rural employment opportunities more accessible and accommodating to persons with disabilities. As with the Breaking New Ground Resource Center, this effort has been carried out through the Cooperative Extension Service, which has offices covering every county in the U.S., and in partnership with a wide range of like-minded organizations such as Goodwill Industries,

Easter Seals, the Arthritis Foundation, federally funded rural centers for independent living, state vocational rehabilitation agencies, and the Veteran's Administration.

To accomplish its mission, AgrAbility staff members provide direct, on-farm services to assess the need for technologies and other modifications that can keep our clients active in agriculture. AgrAbility has also collaborated with manufacturers and fabricators of assistive technology to develop new devices that enable farmers and ranchers to accomplish tasks that had become impossible or difficult after experiencing a disability. One fabricator, Life Essentials of Brookston, Indiana has now completed over 2,000 modifications to tractors, combines, skid loaders, and other agricultural equipment for use by farmers and ranchers who have experienced spinal cord injuries, amputations, strokes, and other physical disabilities. The National AgrAbility Project has also developed an extensive database of assistive technology for agricultural workers known as The Toolbox, which is available online to a world-wide audience ([www.agrability.org](http://www.agrability.org)).

Over the past three years, with generous financial support from the CHS Foundation of Minnesota, and in collaboration with the Farmer Veteran Coalition and other veteran organizations, the AgrAbility Program has made a concerted effort to reach out to veterans, especially those with service-related disabilities. Staff members come alongside veterans and build meaningful relationships, an approach that is in harmony with the spirit and history of the Cooperative Extension Service. They provide assistance, without engendering dependency, to assist clients in exploring strategies that will enable them to return to farming or become successfully engaged in agriculture as beginning farmers. This has been accomplished by organizing workshops specifically for veterans, promoting existing resources to veterans through the National AgrAbility website ([www.agrability.org](http://www.agrability.org)), conducting webinars for rehabilitation professionals on working with returning disabled veterans who want to farm, and raising the awareness of rural lending agencies and rural community leaders on the importance of ensuring that veterans have access to the same resources needed by all farmers to be successful. Events have included training tracks at our annual National AgrAbility Workshops for both farmer veterans and AgrAbility staff to help them provide more effective services to veterans. In addition to AgrAbility's efforts, workshops have been conducted in many states

around the country for female veterans engaged in agriculture, new and beginning farmer veterans, and those interested in organic and sustainable farming practices.

Measuring the success of this type of program can be difficult and expensive, but several indicators suggest a high return on the investments being made by USDA in the AgrAbility Program. A review of 65 AgrAbility clients in Indiana who received collaborative services from AgrAbility and the Indiana Department of Vocational Rehabilitation beginning in 2006, found that ten years later, 61 are still engaged in agriculture, living on the same farm, and receiving all or part of their income from agricultural production. A study by Colorado State University has found that AgrAbility clients who received on-farm visits and follow-up assistance from AgrAbility staff demonstrate a significant enhancement in their quality of life scores using standard assessment tools. Success is also communicated through the comments made by AgrAbility clientele when surveyed. One veteran from Vermont stated:

*I ended up linking up with people of AgrAbility, and that has been really wonderful because it's not just working with veterans. [It's] working with people who have disability, all types of disabilities, and they all had different types of backgrounds. And they are all farming different things...And it's amazing to me that that this project has gotten people to continue their livelihood how it was before you know...And I, you know, am very honored to be able to work in the fields and knowing that there are all these groups and organizations who were working every day to make efforts to see to it that people can farm, that veterans can farm.*

Another veteran farmer from Missouri responded to the question, 'What AgrAbility means to me' with:

*I would say to any farmer that has not experienced AgrAbility, you need to get up, open your eyes and take a look. AgrAbility has helped every farmer that I have spoken to tremendously and make them proud. So if you haven't seen AgrAbility, it will put a smile on your face, all those negatives that say you can't do that, through AgrAbility and a little will of [your own], you will go a long way.*

Some of the initiatives for veterans that we are currently working on within the AgrAbility program include a video production titled, "The Next Mission", which incorporates interviews with farmer veterans and emphasizes transition difficulties, the therapeutic aspects of farming

and the available resources. In addition, several of our state AgrAbility projects have partnered with farmer veterans to start state chapters of the Farmer Veteran Coalition and also promote the “Homegrown by Heroes” initiative that brands agricultural products as produced by veterans.

In addition to my involvement with veteran programs within the AgrAbility program, I am also involved in Indiana’s USDA Beginning Farmer Rancher Development program as well as the Farmer Veteran Coalition’s Beginning Farmer Rancher Development initiative. In this capacity, I’ve had the opportunity to host several workshops and farm tours for beginning farmer veterans. These workshops and those offered by other AgrAbility state programs are usually filled to capacity. I’m always amazed at the numbers of veterans or even those currently still in an active military duty status that are planning to farm.

Through these experiences, I’ve come to several personal conclusions. 1) Land acquisition and financing opportunities are the largest hurdle to the beginning farmer veteran. Many transitioning veterans do not have the opportunity to return back to the family farm and inherit the land and equipment that generally goes along with that. 2) Most veterans that we work with come from rural communities, were familiar with the farm life, and at some point decided that that’s the life they wanted. 3) Most veterans who attend our training are interested in small acreage farming, not large production agriculture. 4) Farming, whether working with animals or growing crops in the soil, is therapeutic to those suffering from the common disabilities of wartime service, such as post-traumatic stress and/or traumatic brain injuries. 5) Many AgrAbility clients feel that they NEED to farm; it’s that strong a calling. I’ve heard farmer veterans say that farming saved their lives and often reduced their reliance on drugs and alcohol to cope with their issues. That’s not something that is said of many career choices.

With the estimated dearth of farmers to take this country into the next 20 to 30 years, we NEED veterans to consider careers in agriculture. And, I also take pride in the observation that a significant number of farmer veterans are not only giving back to their communities by providing food; they are also giving back to their fellow veterans. Many have established nonprofit organizations and are training, mentoring, hiring, and encouraging other veterans in their desire to farm.

I encourage the members of this committee to continue supporting the efforts of the USDA AgrAbility Program and consider how its services can be expanded to the 30 states that do not currently receive USDA funding, including some of the nation's most important agricultural states such as Iowa, Minnesota, New York, Florida, Oregon, Alabama, and Washington. As a veteran and a farmer, and now as a provider of AgrAbility services, I am keenly aware of the benefits this program has had on the lives of many farmer veterans, including my own.

Thank you.