

In 1979, a farmer with some severe disabilities approached Purdue University's department of Agriculture and Biological Engineering to assist him in modifying his tractor so he could keep on working his farm. The group in the department managed to rig up a lift system to help him get in and out of his tractor with ease.

Out of this partnership was birthed the Breaking New Ground Research Center and Outreach Program, which continues to serve disabled Indiana residents working in rural, agricultural environments. "Our mission is to help farmers overcome disabilities," said Linda Tarr, AgrAbility Coordinator at Hoosier Uplands. The landmark program became a model for the USDA AgrAbility program which now funds similar programs in 24 states, including Indiana. Tarr says that Purdue, in fact, holds both state and national grants to help continue their work with the BNG program.

The farming life can be very rewarding, but it's certainly not without its challenges and potential perils. "Farm related injuries affect around one out of

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AgriAbility . . .

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nine Indiana farm families every year," Tarr explained. In addition to helping farmers themselves, the BNG Research Center also wants to ensure that their families are having their needs met as well.

"We don't just help residents with physical disabilities," she continued. "The program is also open to those with chronic diseases such as arthritis and diabetes." The victims of spinal cord, back or head injuries, those with visual or hearing impairment, and those recovering from a stroke or similar condition are among those eligible for the Research Center's services.

Tarr also confirmed that worksite modification, such as wheelchair lifts, are simply one of the services offered by Purdue's program. In addition to procuring additional assistive technology as one's needs demand, the BNG group assists Indiana residents through an on-site consultation and improved access to FFA and 4-H programs.

The USDA AgrAbility program hosts a national workshop every year where benefactors of the BNG program can network and get updated on the latest breakthroughs in assistive agricultural technologies. Tarr said this year's workshop in Minneapolis, Minn. was a great success. The 2014 workshop will take place in Lexington, Ky. Check the national AgrAbility website, www.agrability.com, for the latest news on next year's workshop.

The Breaking New Ground Research Center continues to help Hoosiers in need and provide a series of priceless services to many of our disabled, rural residents who are determined not to let their disabilities control their lives. But Tarr says they want to help even more people. "We're always looking for farmers and families to help." Despite their great successes with the program over the past two decades, she said a surprising number of people still aren't even aware that the program exists so close to home. For instance, Tarr pointed out that nobody from Washington County has requested assistance from the BNG Center. But she hopes AgrAbility's influence will reach more Indiana counties as word of mouth continues to spread.

There are no income guidelines for requesting assistance, you simply need to contact your local AgrAbility program, and they'll take the reigns from there. In addition to receiving funding from the USDA AgrAbility program, the Breaking New Ground program also receives financial assistance from local organizations such as the Indiana Chapter of the Arthritis Foundation and

AgrAbility program empowering farmers

Written by

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Hoosier Uplands.

If you would like more information or to request assistance from the BNG Research Center, please contact Linda Tarr at 812-849-4447, 800-827-2219, or email her at ltarr@hoosieruplands.org.