

The North Carolina ABILITY Program -- Helping Disabled Farmers

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Technology is prevalent in today's society. We use technology in our jobs, in our homes, and in recreational and leisure activities. Technology helps many of us "get ahead." It saves time (the automatic teller machine), makes things easier (the electric can opener), reduces fatigue (the remote control), provides information (computer bulletin boards), and adds to our enjoyment of life (video games).

For farmers with disabilities, technology is an equalizer. It "levels the playing field," so farmers with movement, sensory, or communication impairments can participate alongside their nondisabled peers. Farmers having special needs benefit from *assistive technology* in the workplace. Assistive technology is any piece of equipment or device used to increase the independence of someone with a disability. *Assistive technology devices* are the "tools" that people with disabilities use for working, learning, living, and playing. *Assistive technology services* help individuals acquire adaptive equipment and learn how to use and care for it.

The **NC ABILITY Program** helps disabled farmers identify and acquire assistive technology. The program is administered by the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service (NCCES). NCCES, together with a network of state organizations and farmers, has successfully established a program to accommodate farmers with disabilities, eliminate barriers, and organize a network of services for farmers with disabilities and their families. The **NC ABILITY Program** is supported by the United States Department of Agriculture's National AgrAbility Program, and the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust Fund.

The **NC Ability Program** takes a direct service approach in visiting farms, assessing individual farmer's needs, and providing information to help farmers obtain disability-related equipment or modifications. Educational programs teach agricultural and health professionals about the needs of disabled farmers and about available resources. A demonstration van is also used to visit farmers requesting services and to demonstrate assistive technology equipment. Services of the Program are provided to all counties in the state without charge.

The success of the **NC ABILITY Program** is illustrated by the assistance it provided to a North Carolina turkey farmer. This farmer sustained a brain injury in a brutal attack several years ago. As a result of her injuries, she experienced difficulty using standard tractor controls and difficulty carrying feed throughout the brooder house. By working with local suppliers, the **NC ABILITY Program** arranged custom hand controls for her tractor's clutch and brake, and purchased a second-hand golf cart for transportation inside the brooder house.

Today, because of the **NC ABILITY Program's** presence, [Extension agents](#), health care organizations, and social service agencies are more aware of the technology available for farmers with disabilities. Many North Carolina farmers with disabilities are learning how assistive technology can help them become more successful and productive in agriculture. They are now able to more fully function, no longer falling out of the mainstream systems because they live in rural areas or do not qualify for other assistance. The **NC ABILITY Program** offers disabled farmers resources and opportunities to help them maintain their farms, and thus protect their livelihood and way of life.

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