

Help for
FARMERS



First Call For Help is a free, confidential service offered by United Way Wisconsin that offers information and referral services 24 hour a day to people who are facing hard times.

First call for help will help you get in touch with programs specific to farmers like the Wisconsin Farm Center, Future Fields, Harvest of Hope Fund, Project Isidore c/o the Wisconsin Farmers Foundation, Inc., Wisconsin housing and Economic Development Authority, Farm Service Agencies, Farm Link, BadgerCare, National Farm Medicine Center, and Counseling Services.

The program will be available statewide within the next two years. For now, however, contact United Way Wisconsin at (608) 246-4381 or on the web at www.unitedway.wi.org for the information and referrals services offered by United Way in your community.

You can contact United Way Marathon County at 1 (800)922-5590 or on the web at www.unitedwaymc.org. If you are in Dane, Milwaukee, Racine or Waukesha Counties, dial "211".

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Promoting Success in Agriculture for People with Disabilities and Their Families

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FEATURING:

Coming to Terms With a Disability- Marvin Laukant

Partners: Andy Hager

Congratulations and Thank You...Jim Zell!

United Way's First Call for Help

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UW Extension



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AgrAbility of Wisconsin

Plowing Ahead

Coming to Terms with a Disability - Marvin Laukant

Marvin Laukant is a dairy and beef farmer who lives and works in Sauk County outside of Rock Springs, Wisconsin. He has been farming his whole life. Marvin says of his early life experiences, "I started out, we had horses and tractors. I thrashed and shredded corn. I grew up with all that you see. By the time I got out of high school, most of the farmers weren't doing that anymore, but we still were. There were easier ways of doing it."



Paul Leverenz and Marvin Laukant at Marvin's farm.

Farming with modern equipment and techniques became Marvin's goal. Of this he says, "I have far exceeded what I planned on. I didn't know, nobody did back then, that times would change this fast. You have to bend with the times. That is all there is to it." His willingness to use new equipment has made coping with his disability easier.

As a young man, Marvin used to tell himself: "You can do this yourself even if it takes you until midnight!" He changed his attitude about work in response to arthritis, a painful back injury and surgery two years ago. During his recovery in May of 2000, he read a story about AgrAbility of Wisconsin in a farm newspaper. He had already read a few stories about AgrAbility, but was reluctant to admit that he had a disability. He commented, "You hate to admit it. Now, it doesn't bother me very much, but boy, at first it was rough. You talk to my wife and she will tell you that I am a stubborn mule because I had my beliefs and it was hard to let go of some of them. I should have applied 10 years ago." Marvin finally called AgrAbility of Wisconsin in July 2000 because he was still not able to walk. He scheduled an appointment with Paul Leverenz, Director of AgrAbility partner Easter Seals Wisconsin's Resource Center for Farmers with Disabilities and hoped for the best.

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A 6x4 John Deere Gator allows Marvin to focus his energy on farming rather than walking.

Paul Leverenz visited Marvin's farm in January 2001 to help Marvin figure out how to continue farming with his disability. They made a plan to improve several areas of the worksite. For instance, to improve feeding in the milking barn, Paul suggested an automatic feed cart and an auger system to reduce the amount of physical labor required to move heavy feed from the silo or bin to the bunk. Marvin hired farm workers for chores like milking that strained his back. His beef operation served two purposes; it generated income to help pay the farm workers and consumed extra hay. Paul and Marvin focused on adding assistive technology like extra steps, handholds, air ride seats and automatic hitching systems to Marvin's existing equipment. The steps and handholds have allowed Marvin easier access to the cabs and the air ride seats help prevent further injury from jarring and poor body

positioning. Paul suggested that the foot controls of the skid steer be fitted with hand controls to compensate for Marvin's limited ability to use his feet.

Much of Marvin's farm machinery has been fitted with automatic hitches to reduce risk of injury and the number of times Marvin gets on and off his equipment while hitching. He uses the Agri Speed hitch, which is bolted and/or welded to the existing hitch system. With automatic hitches, Marvin can hitch and unhitch equipment from the cab without a second person on the ground. Marvin learned first hand about the risks involved with manual hitching. Last summer, before his farm equipment had automatic hitches, he was on the ground guiding the telescoping tongue of a wagon to the tractor hitch while a farm worker operated the tractor. The tractor suddenly lurched backward and severed Marvin's finger except for a piece of skin. Doctors were able to reattach Marvin's finger, but the complications, pain, and suffering are something he will not soon forget.



Marvin's son, Charlie, and Paul Leverenz stand next to a tractor fitted with extra steps and handholds, an air ride seat, and an Agri-Speed hitch.

The Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) provided assistance to Marvin and funded most of the equipment. Marvin said that the process was not quick and he made many phone calls to follow up on the progress of his services, but the end results were worth it. Paul Leverenz commented, "DVR funds are not a handout, they simply level the playing field for people with disabilities." Marvin's family is "tickled pink" because AgrAbility has made his life and farm work easier. Marvin gives credit for continuing farming to his tight knit family, AgrAbility of Wisconsin and the Wisconsin Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. Marvin plans to continue farming with his son Charlie.

Partners AgrAbility and UW-Extension: a Good Match

As a UW-Extension Agricultural Agent, I work with farmers whose needs vary widely and I count on many peoples' expertise and the resources they can access in order to get the job done. Over the years, I've worked with AgrAbility staff on a number of situations where the expertise and resources they provided was the difference between offering meaningful assistance and being unable to do so.

The situations where we came together typically involved people whose needs were quite specific and would not be addressed by more general responses. They needed someone who could and would approach their situations with a real recognition of the uniqueness of the problems involved and a willingness to seek "personalized" solutions. Rather than telling people with physical challenges that "they should get out of farming," the AgrAbility approach clearly looks for ways to will help people stay in farming.

As an Agricultural Agent, my perspective tends to focus on the whole farm business, enterprise analysis and how all the pieces fit together to make the farm business work. AgrAbility brings people to the situation with special skills in identifying the specific "bottlenecks" in how work is done that present particular challenges to the farmers. Add to this AgrAbility's experiences with changes others have made to address such challenges and their awareness of resources that can be brought to bear on the problem and you have a powerful combination.

The overall result tends to be based on a good understanding of the overall farm operation, the goals of the people on the farm, the limitations they work under and the tasks that are particularly challenging for them. Oftentimes, coming up with a different way to accomplish some of these "strategic" tasks makes significant differences in whether or not the people can continue to farm.

I don't deal with AgrAbility on an "everyday" basis, but when I encounter situations where people have suffered injury or the accumulated physical stress common to farming, the opportunity to team up with the folks from AgrAbility allows me to respond with expertise, resources and possible solutions that I simply couldn't offer any other way. The end results are positive; we share expertise and experience, get to know each other better and the clientele are better served. That's win - win - win.

Andy Hager
Taylor County



Plowing Ahead

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Congratulations and Thank You...Jim Zell!
AgrAbility of Wisconsin Farmer Network and Speaker Bureau volunteer, Jim Zell, received a "Service to Agriculture" award from Marathon County Farm Bureau on May 30, 2002 for his outstanding commitment to sharing his knowledge about farming with a disability and rotational grazing with other Wisconsin farmers. Jim is a great supporter of AgrAbility and an asset to farmers with disabilities.