

## Staying Mobile to Keep Farming: Dennis' Story of Determination

Twenty years ago, farmer Dennis Hunsberger came down with bacterial meningitis. One day he was feeling fine, and the next he fell into a coma. He didn't regain consciousness for three weeks.

Dennis eventually recovered, but poor circulation can be a lingering side effect of the illness, and the skin on his heels died, leading to severe ulcers. By late 2016, the sores had infected the bone, and he needed surgery to remove both feet.

Even facing this serious operation, farming was on his mind.

"He said he was determined to get back on that tractor by spring to start planting," said his wife, Lori. "And if you want to see a determined man, this is him right here." She smiled at her husband.

First Dennis was in a wheelchair, then he got two prostheses that reach almost up to each knee. Eventually, he moved to a walker and then a cane.

It took a few months to get back to work, but he did it.

"I pretty well do everything that I did before," Dennis said.

Dennis and Lori farm 500 acres and raise over a hundred thousand chickens in central Pennsylvania. Even while Dennis was still re-learning how to walk, the farm needed his attention. "We had a cable break in the chicken house, and I climbed a 5-foot step ladder within two months of having these feet on, because I needed to fix that cable to get the ventilation right in the chicken house," he said.

Eventually, Dennis connected with AgrAbility, a nationwide group that supports farmers with disabilities. AgrAbility staff

worked with PA's Office of Vocational Rehabilitation to help Dennis acquire some equipment. For instance, Dennis drives a huge truck that carries corn between his fields and the mill. The load has to be covered with a tarp in case of wind or rain.

"I used to have to crawl along the side of the truck to strap it down," he explains. "Now, we made it so that I just have to hit a button and it tarps it."

Dennis lifts himself into the front seat a little unsteadily and hits the button. The tarp quickly unrolls across the massive truck bed, like a convertible top for corn passengers.

His bright green John Deere tractor is also modified. It's from the 1970s and only

comes with one step up to the seat. For Dennis, getting inside is like trying to get on a school bus with no stairs.

"It's a whole lot harder with just the one step," he said. "It's a lot more energy and it's not as safe for me, since I don't have the mobility I used to have."



### Partnership: AgrAbility PA & OVR

Dennis worked with AgrAbility PA and PA's Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) to acquire an automated, towable lift, additional steps for a tractor, and two automatic truck bed covers to protect loads of crops. OVR has assisted many farmers throughout the state of Pennsylvania to acquire assistive technology that has made a positive impact.

To learn more about OVR and services for people with disabilities to obtain or maintain employment, visit [www.dli.pa.us](http://www.dli.pa.us) and search OVR, or call 800.442.6351 (Voice) or 866.830.7327 (TTY).

Dennis got two extra steps put in, and it made a huge difference. Some things still give him trouble, though — it's hard not being able to feel where his feet are, and he sometimes loses his balance. That happened recently when Dennis was laying drain pipe with a neighbor.



The Hunsberger Farm is located in Snyder County.

*Staying Mobile continued inside*

## From the Director



Earlier this year, AgrAbility for Pennsylvanians was awarded funding from the U.S Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (USDA-NIFA) to continue providing assistance to individuals farming with disabilities.

The USDA-NIFA grant supports AgrAbility PA, which is a partnership between Penn State Extension and UCP of Central Pennsylvania, a nonprofit specializing in services for

people of all ages with a disability. AgrAbility PA provides direct services to farmers and farm families with a disability or long-term health condition who wish to continue in agricultural production.

The health and safety of our nation's agricultural community is of utmost importance. We are grateful for the financial support from USDA-NIFA so that we may continue to promote quality of life and independence for farmers and farm families with disabilities or long-term health conditions.

Since its inception at Penn State in 1995, AgrAbility PA has provided direct services to more than 750 agricultural producers in the state by conducting on-farm assessments, providing farmers with disabilities with individualized recommendations about farm accessibility, and identifying assistive technology devices and providers. Thousands more are the recipients of indirect services, such as referrals and farm safety education.

As the age of the farming population increases, there is not a sufficient number of young people to replace those farmers when they leave the workforce, so it's even more important to provide assistance to farmers with disabilities so they can remain active.

Strong statewide partnerships have played a critical role in AgrAbility PA's strengths and successes over the years, and we want to recognize these leaders within our Commonwealth. Dedicated personnel from these organizations, non-profits,

governmental agencies, and the educational sector gathered this past spring in State College to continue our collaborative work to support farmers and agricultural workers with a disability or long-term health condition through the resources and services we can offer. We also talked about emerging issues in agriculture. Our deepest thanks to:

- Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences
- Penn State Department of Agricultural Economics, Sociology, and Education
- Penn State Department of Agricultural and Biological Engineering
- Penn State World Campus and Continuing Education (Academic Advisory-Military)
- Penn State Extension
- UCP Central PA
- Pennsylvania Office of Vocational Rehabilitation
- Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health
- Pennsylvania Farm Bureau
- Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture
- Pennsylvania Assistive Technology Foundation
- PA Initiative on Assistive Technology
- USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service
- Fisher's Farm Market

I come from a farming background — my grandfather was a farmer. Unfortunately, pain caused by arthritis hindered his ability to keep farming. I wonder how much better his life would have been if there had been a program like this available to him, a program like AgrAbility PA supported by these great organizations. He truly loved farming.

Working together to make a difference in the lives of farmers across the state will continue to be one of the great joys of being involved with this project.

*- Dr. Connie Baggett  
Project Director, AgrAbility PA  
Associate Professor of Agricultural and Extension Education  
Penn State University*

### *Staying Mobile* continued from cover

"I was still walking around there, and I got off the loader, the backhoe, and fell down because of the mud and the tall weeds there," he says, laughing. "Got me mixed up in my feet. But I got back up again."

The average age of farmers in the United States has increased in recent decades, from about 51 years to 58 years. As American farmers grow older, more people may experience mobility issues and need the adaptive technology Dennis Hunsberger uses.

*Thanks to Philadelphia's WHYY (NPR-affiliated radio station) for sharing Dennis' story in May 2018 on their weekly show, The Pulse. Article written by freelance reporter Abby Holtzman.*



Dennis stands next to his automated, towable lift.



# Assistive Technology

Assistive technology (AT) is any item, equipment, or product that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities for someone with a disability or long-term health condition. Each year, AgrAbility PA works with farmers and agricultural workers throughout the state to make recommendations on assistive technology that is available to help around the farm. Some of these options include:

## On The Farm

**Battery Operated Grease Gun** Operating a grease gun can be a difficult task for individuals who have limited grip strength. A battery operated grease gun, such as a Milwaukee M18, greases equipment with the squeeze of a button.



[www.milwaukeetool.com/power-tools/cordless/2646-22ct](http://www.milwaukeetool.com/power-tools/cordless/2646-22ct)



Pair with Gripeeze gloves for additional gripping assistance!

[www.disabilityworktools.com/products/gripeeze-home-and-garden-glove](http://www.disabilityworktools.com/products/gripeeze-home-and-garden-glove)



**Tractor Door Cylinder** This device allows for easier and safe access to cab tractors. The cylinder holds the door open wide freeing both of your hands for safe entry into the cab. This also keeps the door from swinging shut

and hitting you.

[www.tractorseats.com/p-1181-replacement-door-cylinder-shock.aspx](http://www.tractorseats.com/p-1181-replacement-door-cylinder-shock.aspx)

## In the Garden

**Green Heron Tools** These tools are scientifically designed to be ergonomic (or Hergonomic!) for women. This Pennsylvania-based company realizes that women's bodies are different, including less upper-body strength and smaller stature, and have designed tools with that in mind. Green Heron Tools include a spading fork, shovels, hand pruners, and more:



[www.greenherontools.com](http://www.greenherontools.com)

**Drip Irrigation** Watering your garden can take a lot of time and energy, especially when using heavy hoses or watering cans. This can be a challenge for individuals with limited strength or mobility impairments. Simple drip irrigation systems can be set up in the spring and water your plants all summer long. You can even program the system to turn on and off automatically with a timer setting. Various systems are



available, one option can be found here:

[www.gardeners.com/buy/garden-row-snip-n-drip-soaker-system/8587042.html](http://www.gardeners.com/buy/garden-row-snip-n-drip-soaker-system/8587042.html)

## Time for Fun

**Angle Oar Adaptive Paddling** Kayaking can be a fun and enjoyable summer activity. Many adaptations are available to make kayaking accessible. One device, called a Versa, can assist paddlers who have limited upper body strength, limited range of motion, or other shoulder injuries. This device fits into most kayaks and is a device that supports your paddles.



**RV or Motorhome Access Lift** This device can assist individuals who have difficulty climbing the steps into their RV or motorhome. Several options are



available to increase safe access and enable independent camping experiences!

[www.lifeessentialslifts.com/Mobility-Handicap-Accessible-Lifts-Hand-Controls-Steps-Swing-Chairs-ID/8/Step-Assist](http://www.lifeessentialslifts.com/Mobility-Handicap-Accessible-Lifts-Hand-Controls-Steps-Swing-Chairs-ID/8/Step-Assist)

## Congratulations, Line Mountain-Mahantango FFA!

Winners of AgrAbility PA's Bridging Horizons Contest

### The Future of Farming with AgrAbility

Students created a tabletop model of a farm with equipment modifications, adapted tools, and assistive technology. The chapter was recognized with award money and a certificate at the PA FFA State Convention in June 2018.

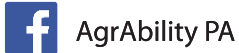


## Contact Us

814.867.5288

[AgrAbility@psu.edu](mailto:AgrAbility@psu.edu)

[AgrAbilityPA.org](http://AgrAbilityPA.org)



## CULTIVATING ACCESSIBLE AGRICULTURE

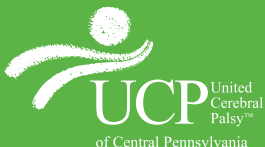
*one farm family at a time*

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Penn State is an equal opportunity, affirmative action employer, and is committed to providing employment opportunities to all qualified applicants without regard to race, color, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, disability, or protected veteran status.

UCP Central PA assures equal opportunities for all individuals regardless of age, sex, race, color, religious creed, ancestry, national origin, disability, handicap, sexual preference, life style, political belief, union membership, limited English proficiency, and any other class of individuals protected from discrimination under state or federal law.

*AgrAbility for Pennsylvanians is a state-wide partnership between Penn State Extension and UCP Central PA.*



## See you at... Ag Progress Days – August 14, 15, & 16

### It's that time of year!

This three-day event is an important one to AgrAbility PA as it gives us a chance to meet farmers who want to continue working in production agriculture despite a disability or health condition.

Ag Progress Days is Pennsylvania's largest outdoor agricultural exposition.

**Tuesday, Aug. 14 .....9am - 5pm**

**Wednesday, Aug. 15 .....9am - 8pm**

**Thursday, Aug. 16 .....9am - 4pm**

**Where:** Russell E. Larson Agricultural Research Center

**Address:** 2710 W Pine Grove Rd | Pennsylvania Furnace, PA

AgrAbility PA will be in the **Rural Health & Safety Tent**



Staff members will be available to meet with farmers, answer questions, and share resources and information.

**Concerned about mobility around the event?** Individuals with a disability or health condition are encouraged to bring a mobility aid device: utility vehicles, power wheelchairs, golf carts, and so forth. Accessible parking spaces are available for individuals displaying handicap permits. All parking is free.

Still have questions? Contact Abbie Spackman, AgrAbility PA Project Assistant, at 814-867-5288 or [aes5450@psu.edu](mailto:aes5450@psu.edu)

**Details about the event:** [www.agsci.psu.edu/apd](http://www.agsci.psu.edu/apd)