



Cultivating Fields of Hope: Assisting Farmers with Disabilities

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With the help of his new hearing aid, Marcos can safely work in the fields and better understand his employer's instructions.

Marcos Quiñones comes from a long line of farmers and agriculture workers. His family has worked in the fields for generations and he loves to work the land. However, it wasn't until recently that 17-year-old Marcos could hear the leaves rustling about as he pulled oranges, lemons and apples from the trees or the sound of the dirt being sifted around when digging up onions and potatoes.

Marcos was born deaf. In Mexico, at the age of seven he got his first hearing aid, which could not be worn when working because of its sensitivity to moisture and perspiration. When he and his family came to the United States two years ago, the California AgrAbility Project connected Marcos with California Children's Services which gave him a brand new hearing aid, one that he could wear all the time, even while working in the fields.

The CalAgrAbility Project, as it is also known, also made it possible for Marcos to attend school where he is currently learning sign language.

Project established to keep farmers farming

Since 2002, the CalAgrAbility Project has helped people like Marcos access the services they need so that they may continue to work in agriculture. The project is the result of a partnership between the University of California at Davis and Easter Seals Superior California. Together they are ensuring that farmers, agricultural workers and ranchers with disabilities have the opportunity to thrive in this physically demanding line of work.

"The whole goal of the project is to keep people that are already working in agriculture to stay working in agriculture," Mary Reyna, CalAgrAbility Project case manager, explained.

More than 20,000 disabling injuries occur on California farms every year, according to

CalAgrAbility statistics. Many of these injuries result in permanent disabilities.

In order to keep farm workers on the job, the project offers a number of services at no cost including on-site technical assistance on adapting and using farm equipment and tools, as well as modification of farm operations, educational services to help prevent further injury, referrals for medical services, and peer support for family members.

By modifying their workspace, many disabled workers are able to continue working and provide for their families. For example, gardeners in wheelchairs may need to raise gardening beds for planting and watering and pave pathways to move around the garden. Tractor drivers who also use wheelchairs can get a chairlift installed on their machine to elevate them onto a tractor that can be operated by a joystick instead of floor pedals. Likewise, a person who uses a prosthesis can use different attachments to perform a number of tasks around the farm: a pitchfork attachment to pitch hay, or a tool attachment to work in the shed.

Variety of services in English and Spanish

The CalAgrAbility project provides services to anyone with a physical, cognitive or illness-related disability such as amputations, cerebral palsy, deafness, mental retardation, cancer or diabetes.

However, often times, the person with a disability is not the farm worker, but his/her child.

"We still help the family because the child that has the disability may not be the actual farm worker, but we still assist them and find out what resources the child needs so mom and dad can continue working," Reyna said.

Currently, the project staff is working with a caseload of 150, but have already helped dozens of disabled agricultural workers across the state access the services they need. Because a large number of agricultural workers are migrants primarily from Mexico, the CalAgrAbility Project recognizes the need for providing these services in Spanish. In fact, over 70% of the project's caseload are Spanish-speaking farm workers. CalAgrAbility produces Spanish-language materials for its consumers such as individual reports,

brochures and newsletters. The project's website is also available in Spanish.

As a case manager, Reyna works one-on-one with these Spanish-speaking families and often accompanies them to medical appointments and other meetings, as well as helps them fill out insurance forms and other documents necessary to receive the services they need.

Understanding life as an agriculture worker and the challenges it poses comes easy to Reyna. Her parents harvested olives and peaches for many years.

"This is my job, but I don't see it as a job. It's a way for me to give back to my personal community...and it's satisfying knowing that I can teach people to be their own advocate. I want to empower them," Reyna said. "We want to teach them the skills to navigate the system and seek out these resources so that they can teach others and advocate for themselves because we don't know how long we're going to be around."

For more information on the National AgrAbility Project, log onto www.agrabilityproject.org or call toll-free 1-800-477-6129.

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