

UC's CalAgrAbility is an advocate for disabled farmers and farmworkers

Fresno raisin grower Ray Austin wanted to keep farming. However, the 53-year-old Fresno native, born with just one leg and other disabilities, was in constant pain from his ill-fitting, worn-out leg prosthesis. Though he had some medical insurance, he couldn't afford the \$11,000 replacement cost.



*Ray
Austin in
his
Fresno
County
raisin
vineyard.*

Searching the Web, Austin found CalAgrAbility, a University of California program that works with disabled farmers and farmworkers to keep them in agriculture.

Project manager Martha Stiles personally helped Austin navigate state agencies. In short order, he received a new prosthesis and an all-terrain vehicle to get around on the farm.

"For all my life, I've tried to get help. I tried Farm Aid, disability organizations, anything I could think of and I never got any assistance until I met Martha Stiles," Austin said. "She went with me to the Department of Rehabilitation. I've been down there before to no avail. She got them to do something."

Farmworker Sebastián Méndez was harvesting plums in Yolo County when one of the trees toppled over onto him. Severely injured and unable to speak English, Mendez struggled with his medical appointments, pharmacy consultations and paperwork. Mary Reyna, a case manager with CalAgrAbility, served as his interpreter, translated correspondence and attended court appointments with him for moral support. Ultimately, Méndez settled his case with workers' compensation and cashed out the vocational rehabilitation funds for which he was eligible. With the money, he established a beekeeping operation in Mexico.

These are just two of 65 Californians who have received assistance from the federally funded CalAgrAbility program in the three years since it was launched at UC Davis. CalAgrAbility is part of a nationwide effort established by the 1990 Farm Bill and funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In California, the program is conducted in partnership with Easter Seals Superior, a Sacramento-based nonprofit organization with a long history of assisting disabled Californians.

Stiles and Reyna visit farm shows, make presentations at conferences, send out public service announcements, attend community health fairs and maintain the Web site to inform disabled workers of their services. Some conditions are very common, such as arthritis, deteriorating vision, hearing loss or mobility problems. Other people face more serious challenges, such as amputations or spinal injuries.

"We believe that solutions exist, and we are willing to do all we can to connect people with solutions that will give more control over their lives," Stiles said. "We don't give out money, but we help them find ways to meet their needs."

CalAgrAbility services

CalAgrAbility intervention typically begins with a site visit and farm assessment. A staff member can help farmers and workers design and customize assistance plans based on the type of farming operation or job tasks, and taking into consideration the needs of the individual who has a permanent injury or disability and his or her family. The plan may include worksite modification, peer support, job restructuring, and equipment purchase or modification. Staff can help identify funding, services or care resources. They can also assist with stress management and health care coordination.

Even though CalAgrAbility started out in the 13-county Easter Seals Superior region, the program now has consumers as far south as San Bernardino County and as far north as Modoc County. To enroll or to get more information about CalAgrAbility, visit the Web site <http://calagrability.ucdavis.edu> or contact Martha Stiles at UC at (530) 752-2606, mcstiles@ucdavis.edu, or Mary Reyna at Easter Seals at (916) 679-3117, maryr@easterseals-superiorca.org.



Ray Austin in his Fresno County raisin vineyard.

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