

Bulletin #2022, Tips for Farmers Who Hire Individuals with Disabilities

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Hiring any new employee requires understanding and patience for success to result. The purpose of this fact sheet is to provide a set of ideas for you, as a farmer or manager, to consider implementing so that both the individual and the farm can benefit. This job, whether as a paid or volunteer position, will help an individual with disabilities gain skills, build confidence, network and build working relationships with others, and help them to grow personally and professionally. This opportunity may be



one of the most important steps they take on their path to success. Thank you for providing an opportunity for individuals with disabilities to work on your farm.

Identify Goals

You probably have one or more goals in hiring a worker or volunteer worker on your farm. The first step is to know whether your farm is hiring a volunteer worker or a paid worker, as the legal requirements for the two categories are very different. Volunteer workers cannot bring a total net benefit to the farm. You must provide and document enough educational benefits to the volunteer worker to allow for a stipend or unpaid work. Next,

identify the goal(s) for the worker. Write and keep these goals posted or filed as a reminder. If you post goals for one worker, you must post goals for each team member so there is not the sense of singling out or creating isolation of the worker. Tell or show the worker (and their job coach if applicable) your goal(s) in having them as a worker on the farm. In your required personnel files, date and keep a copy of your goal(s) for the worker in their file. If the worker can sign the goals for the file copy, have them do so, or have a copy of the goals witnessed to illustrate that the worker understood and agreed to the goals, including their job coach if they have one.

Be mindful that the person you hire or agree to have on your farm as a volunteer has likely set goals for themselves. This job may be a part of their personal and/or professional goals. Success and investment in the farm also means knowing about their own goals, requesting to see written goals, if they exist. Knowing the worker's goals may help you assist the worker to accomplish them. In addition, understanding their goals may help you be a more effective employer, supervisor, or manager.

Expectations and Understanding of Limitations

As the employer or farm manager, you have expectations of all workers on your farm. This situation is no different for individuals who have a disability. Reasonable and clear expectations are the basis for a good working relationship between employer and employee/volunteer.

Learn as much as you can about the person, including their abilities and limitations. Ask questions of the person, their job coach, guardian, caregiver, or Maine AgrAbility staff person. Learn online from reliable sites about the disability. Visit the [Maine Department of Labor](#) to learn more about disability etiquette information.

Schedules and Time Management Considerations

Reasonable accommodations and setting both farm and farmworkers up for success means knowing how many hours, what kind of labor you need and expect, and what the worker can offer each week. For some individuals with disabilities, this could be their first job. Some individuals with disabilities are unable to work a full day (8 hours or more) or even five or six days a week. Two to three hours a week on a specific day(s) of the week may be their limit due to stamina and endurance.

When making the job offer, set clear expectations. Consider evaluating how the accommodations, hours, and ability to fulfill the job satisfactorily are every week for the first month for individuals who are experiencing their first employment. For more experienced individuals, find out whether they, too, would benefit from weekly review initially or if they would be comfortable with a different review period. These reviews might

need more formality or structure, depending on what needs to be adjusted and what the individual's ways of processing information requires. When setting expectations for the worker, consider these items, and plan accordingly:

Consider this when setting your expectations of the worker and plan accordingly.

- A set work schedule for each worker helps to clarify expectations for all involved. The schedule will likely change based on seasonal tasks and as knowledge and skills are gained and confidence is built.
- Make certain that the start time is clearly conveyed. A key expectation of every worker is to show up on time and be ready to work. If they are going to be late or unable to work on a day, be sure they know how to contact their supervisor in a timely manner.
- It is just as important for the worker to know that the workday is done. Clarify how to punch out or wrap up the workday. Some farms have punch-in clocks while other farms may require every worker to report to the supervisor, crew leader, or foreman.
- Make certain that each worker knows what to do at the beginning and end of the workday. This might include actions such as gathering tools, filling water bottles, checking the order log, sweeping or cleaning up, tool cleaning, tool placement, turning off lights, shutting windows, doors, or vents, signing out, or locking up. A checklist for beginning and ending the workday might be helpful to use for some workers.
- Just like all other workers, make sure that breaks from work are planned and taken. Breaks may be a difficult concept for some individuals to understand. Consider the potential need for longer breaks/lunches depending on the individual's situation, and willingness to make adjustments as needed.

Job Description

Farm work involves a range of responsibilities, knowledge, and skills. Some farm jobs may include tool use, equipment operation, animal care, and handling, customer interactions, money handling, record-keeping, or supervising others. A written job description for each type of job on the farm will help both the supervisor and the worker understand the expectations. A job description can include detailed tasks or a shortlist of simple duties. Job descriptions can be changed as the worker develops and other needs arise on the farm.

How-to Instructions for Specific Tasks

Everyone learns and processes information differently. Your accustomed style of teaching tasks may need adjustment in working with people with specific disabilities. Take time to develop clear and written instructions for specific tasks on the farm. Go over the list with the individual to confirm their understanding. Because reading and comprehension may be difficult for some, go over the instructions verbally and have the individual perform the

process with you (or a co-worker) with them. Repeat as necessary. Some workers benefit from being able to take their completed daily task sheets home. Some workers benefit from having the time to prepare for the next day's tasks, so if that task sheet is available and can go home with them, you set them up for further success.

Assigning appropriate jobs or tasks is important. Tasks with a beginning, middle and end, like stacking a trailer of hay, pruning brush from a fence line, moving a field pen, or cleaning manure from a shed, provides a framework for the worker. Completing a task builds confidence and provides a sense of accomplishment.

Supervision

Some people, whether or not they have disabilities, work well independently and some need more guidance and structure. Adequate supervision adjusts to what workers need to be successful. New workers on the farm may need constant supervision. Some workers must always be supervised (not left alone). This is important for their safety and the safety of others. Know that workers who have experienced discrimination or oppression may be particularly likely to try to prove beyond their regular endurance because they want to show they are good enough. Assurance that the worker is good enough at their expected, rather than at a better-than-others level may be needed.

***“The workers we had so wanted to succeed and might actually push themselves to attempt things they weren’t ready for in order to prove that they weren’t “disabled,” or placing more burden on the farm.”—
Farm Owner***

- **Crew Leader.** Make sure the person in charge of the workers understands the abilities and limitations that exist for each worker. It is very important that the crew leader develops a trusted working relationship with the worker. The crew leader needs to know if there are any accommodations to make, such as watching for early heat stress, or repeating a task with an individual a set number of times, or providing adaptive handles to equipment.
- **Job Coach.** Some individuals with disabilities may have a job coach come to work with them. Job coaches are trained in guiding the worker through the job. They help the worker learn and perform their job duties. Be aware that job coaches may not be familiar with farm work or the dangers of farm work such as livestock, tractors, and other equipment. Take the time to check in with the job coach each day or several times a day if necessary. Job coaches will, like workers and volunteers, need to go through the same safety training as their clients.

- **Co-workers.** Co-workers are one of the benefits of working in groups. We learn from one another and teach one another. We support each other through difficult days and can develop connections that improve our overall well-being. Co-workers may need orientation to a new peer's requirements. Unfortunately, sometimes bias and discriminatory attitudes and practices will become apparent. Correcting this bias and discriminatory attitude or action immediately, and making it clear that the farm welcomes folks with differing ways of being and moving through the world is important.

Safety and Health Considerations

Think, Practice, and Teach Safety. Accidents are painful and expensive. Make sure that you and all of your workers develop a positive safety attitude. This means thinking safety, practicing safety, and teaching safety. Don't be afraid to be a stickler about safety. Repetition is necessary for safety concepts to be understood and become second nature for all people. If you see a worker implementing an unsafe practice, stop it immediately. Take the time to explain why tasks or practices must be done in a safe manner. Recognize and encourage safe workers on the job. If possible, make sure other workers witness/hear the recognition. Some farms start their workday with a group meeting and a short lesson related to safety. For more information about short safety tips visit [Ohio State University](#).

Appropriate Tasks. Ask workers to only perform tasks that match their abilities and capabilities. This may take time for you and the worker to identify these tasks. Take this approach one step at a time. All people, with and without disabilities, have different rates and ways of learning. Each of us has a different maximum speed, maximum uptake for new learning, and usual rate of mistakes, which are typically higher at the beginning of a learning process. It may help to view this job as a learning experience for the worker. If your worker is a volunteer worker, this job is a learning experience, and the law's view of volunteer work means they *cannot be* as productive as paid workers. Patience will likely be necessary.

- **Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).** Provide the necessary PPE to each worker. This could include basic gear such as work gloves, safety glasses, hearing protection, and/or dust masks. It is a good practice to issue PPE to each individual and have him or her be responsible for keeping the gear clean and in working order. Their name or initials on each piece of PPE issued to the worker will help. Replace worn out or damaged PPE as needed. Everyone needs to learn the proper use and care of PPE.

- **Appropriate clothing and footwear.** Farm work usually requires physical work in a variety of conditions (getting wet or dirty or being cold or hot). Make sure the worker understands that proper clothing, work gloves, rain gear, and work boots will make them more comfortable and safer at work. Consider providing a locker or designated hook/hanging area for each employee to keep his or her gear. Provide a sink, soap and towels to wash and dry hands to encourage proper hygiene. Before the first day on the job, make sure the worker (and job coach, if applicable) understand proper clothing and gear expectations.
- **Drinking water.** Hydration is important every day but more important on hot dry days. Make sure drinking water is available to all workers. Many farmers frequently remind workers to drink water, because some workers may not understand.
- **Restrooms.** Relieving oneself is necessary for most people. However, a person with a disability may take a longer time in the restroom because of their disability. An accessible restroom or a porta-potty should be provided to workers with physical disabilities. Be mindful of this need. Since restrooms are allowed to be ¼-mile away from workers in a field, be mindful that workers with mobility disabilities or slower gait may require more time to transit to and from that restroom or may need a vehicle to move them in a timely manner. Some workers may be on a restroom-use schedule, which will need to be factored into your job assignments and expected workflow.
- **Hazardous Conditions.** As you are well aware, hazardous conditions exist on farms. Make sure hazardous conditions are corrected or eliminated and danger zones minimized on the farm. Alert every worker about danger zones and mark them with signs, barriers, and/or locks as appropriate.
- **Medications.** Some workers may need to take medications at work, or test blood sugar. Individuals who require regular medications (non-emergency) will usually know what they need, but they may require a few extra minutes at a restroom and water break to also tend to these needs. Some workers may need access to refrigeration for medications. With the prevalence of diabetes, you may wish to have a sharps disposal in one of your farm restrooms. If you have customers coming to the farm, then place the sharps disposal box there for customer use and give the workers permission to use that restroom. Emergency medications and protocols may also need to be reviewed, particularly for anaphylaxis or heat stress.

Adaptive Tools or Work Modifications

In some cases, adaptive equipment may be needed, for instance, grip-type gloves if a worker doesn't have full use of hands, or boots that are easily removed with zippers, or Velcro. Both employer and worker may not know what is needed until a shake-down period of tasks are completed and missing articles are identified. Connecting with Maine AgrAbility can help identify solutions and adaptive tools to help create a safe and successful work environment.

Recognition and Words of Encouragement

Everyone appreciates being recognized for their good work. Make recognition of a job well done a regular occurrence on your farm. Tell the person when they have performed their job well. Depending on the worker's age, telling the parents or guardian how well the worker performed can make a huge difference for the worker and their family. Give words of encouragement whenever possible, to all your employees. Realize that part of your job as an employer or manager is to develop good workers. Words don't cost anything to say but can reap great rewards for your worker and your business. Words of encouragement help to create a positive work environment for all and provide motivation to continue a job well done.

- **Performance Review.** A performance review or evaluation can be very helpful to the worker and the employer. Such an evaluation helps identify the worker's strengths, weaknesses, and goals for growth. Take time for such an evaluation with each worker on your farm at least once each year. Some individuals would benefit from this type of review more than once a year. Current management practices recommend quarterly reviews, as waiting for an annual review usually misses the learning opportunity window for most people.
- **Exit Interview.** Most farmworkers typically move on after being employed for a season, a year or longer. The move could occur due to life changes such as health or family or be an opportunity for their advancement. No matter the reason for leaving work on your farm, consider performing an exit interview with the worker. This type of interview will help them understand how they performed and what they gained. It will also help you.
- **Recommendation or Job Reference.** If appropriate, consider offering to write a recommendation or letter of reference for the worker who performed satisfactorily. This offer or action can be a real encouragement to an individual as they develop personally and professionally.

The Bottom Line

Hiring a person with a disability on your farm will be an opportunity for growth and learning for everyone involved – the worker, co-workers, and you the farmer. Maine AgrAbility can help Maine AgrAbility is available to provide support to you and your employees. This might include advice (by phone, email, or in-person), recommendations for assistive technology, farm visits, recommendations to adapt equipment or workspaces, effective communication methods, problem-solving, safe practices, and more. Maine AgrAbility works with trained occupational therapists who are familiar with agriculture. There is no fee for this support. Visit Maine AgrAbility, maine.agrability@maine.edu, or 207.944.1533.

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