



# Rural Futures



NYS Legislative Commission on Rural Resources

Summer 2015 ISSUE

## Expanding Job Opportunities

*The importance of protecting job choices for individuals with developmental disabilities*

Across New York State, individuals with developmental disabilities are working in a wide range of jobs. Many people with developmental disabilities find immense satisfaction in community employment, but may face challenges like access to transportation and limited availability of appropriate jobs. Others are not able to sustain jobs in competitive environments because of the nature of their disabilities. Many such individuals thrive in settings like sheltered workshops.

Job choice and availability for people with developmental disabilities is a subject currently receiving significant attention. New proposals have been introduced that could transform the nature of employment for individuals with developmental disabilities. A greater emphasis on community integration has sparked a statewide discussion on what integration means and on preserving an individual's choice of the environment in which they wish to work.

Having a range of employment options is essential to meeting the diverse needs of people with developmental disabilities. This is especially important to the ARCs that provide these services and the individuals utilizing them. ARCs are nonprofit organizations that provide services and support to individuals with developmental disabilities, along with their families. These services may include employment opportunities and training, transportation, integration into community activities, health services, and assistance in pursuing living options.

Job choice and availability are central concerns in allowing people with developmental disabilities the opportunity to pursue what they identify as their most meaningful activity – how they choose to spend their days. The perspectives of individuals who work in various settings demonstrate this importance.



Mr. Michael Bruce.  
(Photo courtesy of Herkimer ARC.)

### Michael Bruce

For more than two decades, Mr. Michael Bruce has worked at Herkimer Industries, the workshop associated with Herkimer County's ARC. Sometimes he completes small assembly tasks at a workbench. On other occasions, he measures and cuts straps that are destined for use by the military. He also builds boxes that will be used by a local manufacturer.

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## Summer 2015 Rural Futures

### NEWS OF INTEREST ABOUT RURAL NEW YORK STATE

A Publication of the NYS Legislative  
Commission on Rural Resources

The NYS Legislative Commission on  
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Mr. Bruce values the paycheck he earns. It has enabled him to purchase DVDs for his entertainment, and he even took a trip last summer with a coworker to see a Yankees game in the Bronx.

His job functions as much more than a place to earn a paycheck. It is an opportunity to interact with others and develop friendships. It has also contributed toward his independence. He used to live in a residential home, but now he rents an apartment in the community with a friend from work.

The flexibility of the job environment has been especially important for him. On occasion, illness has significantly limited his ability to work, and the workshop has been able to adapt to meet his needs.

"Just having the job, the work there, is really, really important," said Mr. Bruce.



Mr. Victor Colon.  
(Photo courtesy of Lexington Center.)

### Victor Colon

Mr. Victor Colon is on a mission to achieve greater independence in his life, and his job at Lexington Center, Fulton County's ARC, is a key component in that process.

"My goal is to be on my own," said Mr. Colon.

He takes immense pride in his job as a part time custodian for Lexington Center. He started as a fill-in; now he enjoys a permanent position. He largely works by himself for about four hours a day, four days per week.

"I like to work hard. I like to earn money," said Mr. Colon. "I love my job."

For Mr. Colon, earning money is crucial for his journey to greater independence. He has his own bank account, and he is careful to use his earnings wisely. He pays his bills first, before spending money on other interests. He is continuing to work on his money management skills. A consistent paycheck is an important part of this equation, and a steady job ensures that he will have the income he needs to pursue greater independence.

While he does not work at a sheltered workshop, Mr. Colon is a member of a self advocacy group. He often speaks up for other individuals with developmental disabilities. He has even traveled to Albany to visit the Capitol and advocate for himself and others, as well as programs like sheltered workshops.



Mr. Douglas Frisbee.  
(Photo courtesy of Schoharie  
County ARC.)

### Douglas Frisbee

Over the past year, Mr. Douglas Frisbee can be found diligently working at SUNY Cobleskill, cleaning the dining rooms and making sure that supplies are well stocked. It is a community job that he loves.

Prior to his current role, Mr. Frisbee spent many years working in a local tavern until it closed its doors. After making some connections at a local café associated with SUNY Cobleskill, Mr. Frisbee was able to get a job at the college.

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## Honoring Their Sacrifice

*How the Badge of Honor Association Recognizes Fallen Officers*



Throughout history, police officers across New York State have died in the line of duty, sacrificing their lives for the sake of their communities. Sadly, it still occurs far too frequently, leaving their families, friends, fellow officers, and neighborhoods to grieve their loss.

Just eight years ago, members of the Rochester Police Department saw a need for an organization that would honor their sacrifice and help the families of these fallen officers. The Badge of Honor Association (BOHA) came into existence. The organization has since expanded well beyond Rochester, serving an area extending across 23 counties in Western and Central New York – from Buffalo to Syracuse.

To recognize those officers who died while serving, BOHA places signs as memorials at the locations where they lost their lives. The signs are bright blue with a white border. They contain a picture of the officer's police department patch, the name of the officer, and the date he or she passed away. BOHA has already placed approximately 100 signs throughout the region. The signs serve as fitting tributes, and they recognize officers who recently died, as well as many who died in the line of duty years ago.

The organization also raises funds to provide immediate financial support to the families who lost their loved ones in the line of duty. It is a significant and meaningful way to help families during a time of deep emotional turmoil.

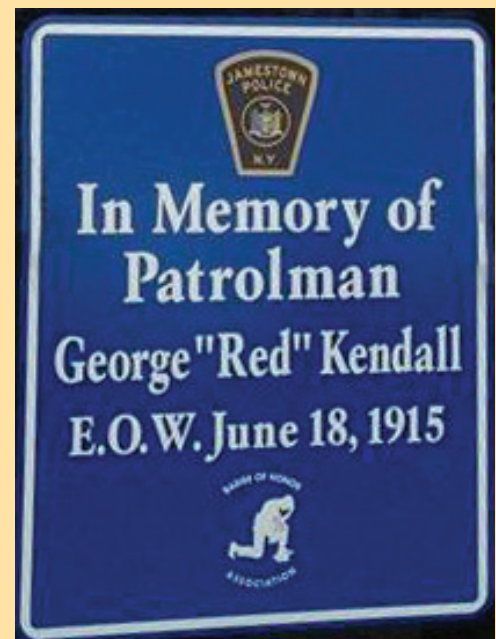
Their largest fundraiser is a Policeman's Ball. This year, the event took place in February with more than 900 people attending. Not only does the ball raise money to support the families of fallen officers, it is also an opportunity to formally recognize the heroic acts of those who lost their lives in the line of duty, along with many other first responders who handled a wide range of critical incidents.

While BOHA began in an urban environment, its expansion now includes the rural areas in Western and Central New York. Rural police officers often operate with little or no backup. They deal with situations that include traffic incidents, drug labs, and domestic violence. For Mr. Bill Rosica, Director of Operations for BOHA, the risks are the same for police officers, whether they serve rural, suburban, or urban communities. Mr. Rosica is also the Lead Class Counselor and an instructor at the Rural Police Training Academy at Genesee Community College, which provides training for rural police departments in Genesee, Livingston, Orleans, and Wyoming Counties.

"The danger is the same as soon as the badge and uniform go on," said Mr. Rosica.

As members of law enforcement, the Badge of Honor Association understands those dangers. Should other officers fall in the line of duty, the organization will continue to honor their memories, serve their communities, and care for their families.

*For more information about the Badge of Honor Association, or to learn how to volunteer or support the organization, please visit their Facebook page at [facebook.com/boha.org](https://www.facebook.com/boha.org).*



An example of a sign placed in Jamestown, New York, to honor a fallen officer. (Photo courtesy of the Badge of Honor Association.)

## Passion, a Plan, and a Consultant

*How NY FarmNet Helps Young Entrepreneurs Enter Agriculture*

The road to farm ownership can be both daunting and quite rewarding. Certainly, a career in agriculture is one of long hours and perseverance. Ideally, it is also a journey with two core elements: passion and planning.

A little guidance along the way is also invaluable, and that is where NY FarmNet becomes an important resource for new and young farmers. The organization provides free, confidential consulting to farm families across New York State. Two brothers, Chip and Pete Shafer, found that to be quite helpful when they purchased Nanticoke Gardens in 2011.

### Young Growers

Nanticoke Gardens is a popular grower and retailer of bedding plants and other garden needs. Located in Endicott, New York, the company was established in 1973. Chip and Pete Shafer are continuing the tradition of providing high quality plants for their customers. These include an extensive selection of annuals, perennials, and hanging baskets. They also grow and sell herb and vegetable plants.

Their retail season is quite short. Typically, sales begin in the last week of April and extend until the last day of June. With such a short season, careful planning is crucial in order to effectively manage the required tasks and finances.

Each brother has a specific role in the business.

Chip Shafer is the “plant guy.” He began as a greenhouse assistant, working for the previous owner for 11 seasons. During that time, he worked his way up to grower and production manager. It was an invaluable experience in what eventually became his path to ownership.

Pete Shafer has a background very different from his brother. Earlier employment includes time spent as a teacher, and nine years working for a beer distributor. He earned a master’s degree in business administration along the way, knowing that he wanted to become a business owner.

Their differing experience and roles complement each other well, and it has resulted in continued success for the business. This is clearly demonstrated by their extremely loyal customers who look forward to coming in each year to meet the owners and to buy the plants that will beautify their homes and populate their gardens.

“Our philosophy is to do what we’re good at. And we’re good at spring bedding plants,” said Pete Shafer.

Purchasing Nanticoke Gardens was no simple task. In mid-2010, the brothers began researching the steps they would need to take and started developing in-depth plans. During this process, they discovered that NY FarmNet provides consultations for young entrepreneurs like themselves.

Shortly after this discovery, they contacted NY FarmNet, and a consultant, Mr. Huck Heintz, soon visited Nanticoke Gardens to meet with the brothers, tour the greenhouses, and review their business plan. Mr. Heintz answered the brothers’ questions, helped smooth out the rough edges of their plan, and helped them navigate through the process of obtaining financing. It was immensely helpful. Without the insight provided by Mr. Heintz, the route to ownership would have taken much longer.

Their planning is paying off. There were 13 greenhouses on site when they bought Nanticoke Gardens in 2011. Since then, they have expanded operations to 18 greenhouses, and this year they opened a new retail location just outside of Ithaca, New York.



Photo courtesy of Nanticoke Gardens.

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Yet, all has not been smooth sailing. Only nine months after purchasing the business, Tropical Storm Lee brought wind and rain to the Southern Tier, leaving their greenhouses under seven feet of water. It took weeks of cleaning up, often with the help of volunteers from the community, including many of their loyal customers. Immediately thereafter, the Shafer brothers began to plan for the future – again.

“We have to look at this as an opportunity,” said Pete Shafer.

Before diving into a dramatic expansion, the brothers reached out again to NY FarmNet, and Mr. Heintz returned to Nanticoke Gardens for more consultation. Once more, the insight provided by Mr. Heintz proved to be tremendously useful. While he did not specifically tell the brothers what they should do, he encouraged the brothers to not overextend themselves during the rebuilding. It served as a reality check for the brothers who found out that scaling back their plans ensured their success.

## The Consultant

Mr. Heintz has a deep connection to agriculture, going back to his childhood when he first milked a cow.

After attending undergraduate and graduate school, and spending time working in the banking industry, he returned to agriculture. He bought a farm in Cuba, New York. He worked hard to learn how to raise an award-winning dairy herd.

Later, he sold the farm and moved to Cayuga, New York, to start a new herd. During that time, he found himself in deep debt and had to dig himself out.

“That was a tremendous learning experience. It was not a lot of fun. Half of the milk check went to [pay off] debt,” said Mr. Heintz. “I learned what not to do.”

He continued his career in agriculture, eventually selling the farm in Cayuga and buying a small farm in Jasper, New York. Throughout his career, he has seen the peaks and valleys of farming – financial difficulties and profitable times. His experience buys him credibility, and he eagerly shares the knowledge he has gained with others through his role as a NY FarmNet consultant.

While Mr. Heintz is more of a financial consultant, there are consultants throughout the State that can help address a wide range of issues, including the complexities of interpersonal relationships and mental health concerns that often go hand-in-hand with farm ownership.

“Our job is to start the conversation,” said Mr. Heintz.

## NY FarmNet’s Larger Role

Last year, NY FarmNet fielded more than 6,000 inquiries. Many of those questions resulted in consultants visiting farms and working closely with new and existing farmers to navigate a wide range of financial, productivity, mental health, and interpersonal challenges.

According to the organization, these interactions resulted in farm expansion or improvements in productivity for more than 90 percent of the families who have worked with NY FarmNet.

Clearly, that interaction has proven useful for Pete and Chip Shafer. They readily admit that there may be easier ways to make a living than a career in agriculture. Yet, their passion for the business, along with careful planning that incorporates helpful advice, has literally resulted in a growing business.



Photo courtesy of Nanticoke Gardens.

For more information about NY FarmNet, please visit [nyfarmnet.org](http://nyfarmnet.org) or call them at 1-800-547-FARM (3276).

## Olympian and Farmer

Katie Uhlaender is known to don a helmet, grab a small sled, and fly headfirst at 80 miles per hour down an icy track built into the side of a mountain.

She is a three-time Olympian, competing in skeleton. It's a fast-paced, gravity-driven sport with connections to New York State. Much of her training has taken place at the track in Lake Placid, New York.

Ms. Uhlaender is also a young farmer and farming advocate who raises beef cattle in Kansas. She has a passion for the farming lifestyle, and she frequently shares her love of agriculture with a wide range of audiences.

Her inspiration and motivation came largely via her father, Ted Uhlaender – a former professional baseball player. He encouraged her to pursue her athletic endeavors with determination and intensity.



Ms. Katie Uhlaender begins a run down the track.  
(Photo courtesy of Ms. Katie Uhlaender.)



Olympian Katie Uhlaender hard at work on her beef cattle farm in Kansas.  
(Photo courtesy of Ms. Katie Uhlaender.)

He also bought a farm east of Denver and convinced Ms. Uhlaender to invest in her future by purchasing her own cattle to be raised on the family farm.

Sadly, her father passed away in 2009 while she was competing. It was a tremendously difficult time for Ms. Uhlaender.

“He was my rock, my foundation,” she said.

When she returned to the farm, she discovered an even deeper connection to a life in agriculture, and she knew that she wanted to pursue farming in addition to her focus on athletic excellence.

Ms. Uhlaender is continuing her father's legacy by working on the farm and learning from an experienced rancher nearby. She approaches it with the very same determination she applies to her athletic pursuits, applying the life-lessons instilled by her father. She also recognizes that there is much for a new farmer to learn, from science to economics, and beyond. That is why she values the local agricultural community and the guidance of her mentor.

“I have a huge respect for the culture of agriculture,” said Ms. Uhlaender.

Ms. Uhlaender often shares her advice and encouragement with those entering farming. She urges young farmers to build on their passion by reaching out to the farming community, taking every opportunity to learn, and seeking out mentors. She also ties in her experience as an Olympian. The dedication, focus, and determination required to be a successful athlete translates very well into farming.

“Have faith. Don't panic. Learn along the way,” she says.

## A Glimpse into Telehealth

*How a North Country Doctor is Using Telepsychiatry*

Dr. Steven Lyndaker specializes in internal medicine and practices in Lowville, New York. He is one of only two internists in rural Lewis County. Two years ago, Dr. Lyndaker partnered with St. Joseph's Hospital in Syracuse to establish a pilot project to provide telepsychiatry services.

According to Dr. Lyndaker, primary care physicians are dealing with more and more psychiatric issues. This type of treatment can be quite complex, often requiring the timely insight from a psychiatrist to help manage the intricacies of medication and other concerns. Frequently, providers must refer their patients to a psychiatrist.

In rural areas, this can be especially difficult. For many patients, it is a challenge to travel to see a primary care physician, let alone travel the greater distances that might be required to see a specialist.



However, it is not just an issue of availability of care. Unfortunately, there can be a stigma associated with seeking psychiatric help. In smaller communities, people may be worried about word getting out if they are seen at a facility specializing in such care. Perhaps one of the biggest advantages of this pilot program is that the consultations take place in a primary care physician's office. It provides a way to remove that stigma from the equation, making it more likely that patients will seek the care they need.

Having a telepsychiatry system in place is helping Dr. Lyndaker address these issues. Providing his patients with the opportunity to interact with a psychiatric specialist via real-time video has proven effective. Dr. Lyndaker utilizes the system for patients who need the expertise of a specialist to manage complex care. However, the telepsychiatry system is not used for those patients who are in acute crisis situations.

For a patient using the system, the process is largely similar to that of any other visit to a doctor's office. Like every visitor to Dr. Lyndaker's office, the patient checks in and is brought to an exam room by a nurse. The exam room is well-lit, and in this case, contains a 21-inch monitor with a built-in camera. The nurse sets up the video conference system, introduces the patient to the specialist, and leaves the room to allow the virtual consultation between the patient and the specialist, who is located at St. Joseph's Hospital, to take place. When the consultation is complete, the patient simply leaves the room and schedules any future appointments through Dr. Lyndaker's staff.

The process is comfortable, familiar, and easy for patients to use. It is having a measurable impact. It has dramatically reduced the wait time and travel requirements for patients needing a consultation. The rates of missed appointments are miniscule. Perhaps most significantly, in multiple cases, patients were able to avoid the cost and difficulty of having to seek inpatient care.

Dr. Lyndaker is adamant about the need to provide access to the best care possible for his patients. He clearly wants to expand the options for care, and not limit opportunities for treatment, simply because someone lives in a rural area. He sees tremendous value in using telehealth tools to address these issues.

"It's practical and pragmatic. It's changing the world one person at a time," said Dr. Lyndaker.

*For more information about this telepsychiatry pilot program, or about other telehealth projects in the North Country, please contact Mr. David Johnson, Telemedicine Project Coordinator for the Fort Drum Regional Health Planning Organization, at [djohnson@fdrhpo.org](mailto:djohnson@fdrhpo.org).*



## Building a Food Hub

Agriculture is vital to New York State, contributing billions to the State's economy. Developing and growing this industry, though, has a bigger impact than just dollar signs and jobs. Strengthening existing farms, establishing new farms, connecting producers with markets, and providing consumers with access to locally grown food are all benefits of agricultural economic development.

In Western New York, an organization called Harvest New York is taking on these challenges, seeking to develop and enhance agriculture's impact within the region. Harvest New York is a program conducted through Cornell Cooperative Extension, utilizing the expertise already established within the extension system.



Given this important mission, Senator Catharine Young, Chair of the Legislative Commission on Rural Resources, included \$600,000 in the state budget for Harvest New York. It will be used to continue the program in Western New York and expand its operations to the North Country and Central New York.

One of Harvest New York's projects, the establishment of a food hub within Western New York, demonstrates the importance of agricultural economic development.

In general, a food hub is a centralized location that manages the logistics of storing, preparing, and distributing food that is grown on nearby farms. Food hubs are being established across the country to help small and midsize farmers connect with markets to sell their products.

With approximately 90 percent of Western New York's farmers classified as small farmers by the United States Department of Agriculture, Harvest New York saw the potential need for a food hub within the region.

Before embarking on a project to establish a food hub, Harvest New York partnered with another local organization, the Field & Fork Network. The two groups worked with a private consultant to conduct an 11-county survey, to determine whether enough supply and demand existed to justify the establishment of a food hub. The survey results indicated the project was worth pursuing.

After conducting an extensive selection process, Eden Valley Growers, located in Eden, New York, was chosen to become the owner and operator of the food hub.

Established in 1956, Eden Valley Growers is a cooperative of ten vegetable farmers all located within a ten-mile radius in Erie County. Expanding their business to other small farms within Western New York is a natural fit, one that is expected to benefit both the cooperative and other farmers. Also, Eden Valley Growers already has the infrastructure in place that is needed to run a food hub. This includes buildings, refrigerated coolers, a fleet of trucks, and, perhaps most importantly, an established network to regional wholesale markets.

Even as work continues in the process of establishing the food hub, Eden Valley Growers is already looking ahead into the possibility of expanding the food hub beyond vegetables. Fruits, grains, organic products, and proteins are all possible products that could be marketed in the future.

As the project moves toward completion, Harvest New York, the Field & Fork Network, and Eden Valley growers are excited to boost regional agriculture and bring more healthy, locally-grown food to consumers in Western New York.

*For more information about Harvest New York, please visit [harvestny.cce.cornell.edu](http://harvestny.cce.cornell.edu). To learn more about Eden Valley Growers, visit their website at [edenvallygrowers.com](http://edenvallygrowers.com).*



## 2015-16 Budget Accomplishments



The State Budget is a critical part of each year's annual legislative session. As Chair of the Legislative Commission on Rural Resources, Senator Catharine Young works hard to ensure that issues related to New York's rural areas are addressed during the process.

Some of these achievements include:

- A transition plan to assist individuals with developmental disabilities in transitioning to integrated activity settings. This plan will provide greater stakeholder input and transparency during the transition, and will investigate how to increase opportunities for an individual's first choice of activity and community involvement. Availability of such opportunities is a particular concern in rural areas.
- Several health initiatives, including an increase in operating aid to critical access hospitals from \$5 million to \$7.5 million, an increase of \$10 million in operating aid to vital access providers, \$355 million in capital funding for geographically isolated hospitals, restoration of funding to rural health networks and rural health care access programs, and an increased air ambulance reimbursement rate under Medicaid.
- Extension of funding for the University at Buffalo's Rural Dentistry Pilot Program, which will increase access to dental services through visits to rural schools, as well as a comprehensive study on attracting dentists to serve in rural areas.
- Funding for a new rural dental demonstration program spearheaded by the New York State Dental Association, which will provide free dental care as well as education on how to obtain long-term dental care, located in federally qualified health centers.
- A precision agriculture study will examine access to and implementation of precision agriculture throughout the State. Professor Harold van Es of Cornell University's School of Integrative Plant Science will serve as the study's principal investigator.
- Financial support for the continuation and expansion of the Harvest NY program, run through the Cornell Cooperative Extension program. The expansion will serve the North Country and Central New York, with new specialist areas including dairy processing, food hub development, and livestock processing.
- An increase in FarmNet funding, to support their mission in providing New York farm families with free, confidential consulting services to assist in developing skills to address financial, family, and production efficiency challenges.
- An amendment to the real property manufacturer's tax credit law, allowing farmers, who have adopted corporate structures for succession planning, to qualify for the credit.
- An increase in operating assistance for public transportation systems in rural counties, from \$3 million to \$4 million.

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It is a job that he thoroughly enjoys.

“I like my bosses. I can kid around with them,” said Mr. Frisbee. “They tell me I’m doing a good job.”

He works at the school for about three and a half hours per day, five days a week. He has some help managing his money, and he saves the money he earns to pay for trips to the Thousand Islands, the Bronx, and other bus tours.

Mr. Frisbee lives on a farm about seven miles outside of town where he can hear coyotes in the distance and enjoy the other sounds of nature. However, it does make for a challenging commute to work. Each workday morning, he rides an ARC bus to a day habilitation center in Cobleskill. Later in the morning, he takes public transportation to his job. He ends his workday with another trip on an ARC bus back home. He gets very upset with snow days, because he cannot get to work.

It demonstrates the challenges inherent in finding jobs in rural areas like Schoharie County. Certainly, availability of community jobs is a concern. So are the transportation difficulties facing individuals with developmental disabilities.

## Brian Wedemeyer

Mr. Brian Wedemeyer is a movie buff, and his dream is to direct and produce a horror movie – his favorite genre.

He is active in a self advocacy group that conducts outreach and training by creating and acting in skits and plays that cover a range of topics, such as bullying or how to make end-of-life decisions. They present their work to groups that include ARCs, school districts, community colleges, and legislators across the state. It dovetails well with his love of movies.

He currently works at Herkimer Industries and is quick to point out the importance such a job plays in his life. It allows him to earn the money he needs to pay his expenses, such as rent and cable. It also provides him more opportunities to enjoy the activities that are important to him.

While he says that the jobs he does at Herkimer Industries are not difficult tasks, it is rewarding to complete them. He prefers to push himself to do more and work harder to receive a good paycheck, rather than having others push him.

He has made many friends at the workshop, and he enjoys taking breaks and eating lunch with them. His supervisors are quite friendly, as well. This social interaction is a key aspect of his job.

Mr. Wedemeyer has worked in a community setting before, but the job was not a good fit. He continues to look for the right community job, but has yet to find it. He would like to work in a store or a warehouse where he can help stock shelves. Unfortunately, it is not an easy job to find, especially in a rural area. In the meantime, he is able to develop his vocational skills through his employment at the workshop.

With his first-hand experience working in a community environment, Mr. Wedemeyer recognizes the difficulties that can be posed by such jobs for individuals with developmental disabilities.

“Some people can’t physically handle the physical nature of a community job,” said Mr. Wedemeyer. “It depends on the person.”



Mr. Brian Wedemeyer. (Photo courtesy of Herkimer ARC.)

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## Legislation

To address the importance of providing the widest possible range of job opportunities to people with developmental disabilities, Senator Catharine M. Young, Chair of the Legislative Commission on Rural Resources, introduced Senate Bill 3893, called the Employment First Choice Act. An identical bill was introduced by Assemblymember Aileen Gunther, and it is also sponsored by Assemblymember Frank Skartados, Co-chair of the Commission.

The bill is focused on preserving an individual's choice to remain in their current work setting, and it would ensure that people with developmental disabilities who currently work in a sheltered workshop will have the choice to remain there.

Senator Young also included an initiative in the state budget requiring a detailed transition plan to assist individuals currently working in sheltered workshop programs. The plan will help with their transitions to integrated community work settings and community-based activities. It will also identify detailed options for individuals who cannot, or choose not to, transition to integrated settings.

The plan will also incorporate the input from a wide range of stakeholders. These include individuals who currently work in sheltered workshops, their families or guardians, and workshop providers. As the Legislature and other groups work to address the availability of employment and day activities for people with developmental disabilities, their feedback will be invaluable to the process.

Clearly, the ability to choose from among a range of employment options is important to people with developmental disabilities, just as it is to anybody else.

"We are people, too," said Mr. Wedemeyer.

## Rural Cooperative Development Grant Program

Improving economic conditions in rural areas can be especially difficult. The United States Department of Agriculture's Rural Cooperative Development Grant program seeks to address this challenge by assisting individuals and businesses in starting up, operating, and expanding rural cooperatives through Cooperative Development Centers.

Examples of work conducted by these centers include business plan development, strategic planning, and leadership and operational improvement training.

There are \$5.8 million in grants available for this fiscal year. One-year grants, up to \$200,000, will be awarded before September 30, 2015. They can be used to cover up to 75 percent of the project cost, with recipients matching the remaining 25 percent. The individuals and businesses that these Cooperative Development Centers serve must be located in rural areas.

The grants are available to non-profit corporations and institutions of higher education. Applications for funding are due by July 30, 2015.

To learn more about the program please visit [www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/rural-cooperative-development-grant-program](http://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/rural-cooperative-development-grant-program).



## Invasive Species Watch: Giant Hogweed (*Heracleum mantegazzianum*)

Giant hogweed is an invasive plant species capable of growing to a size befitting its name. Perhaps most concerning, giant hogweed is a dangerous plant that should not be touched.

It truly is a large plant. Giant hogweed leaves can be up to five feet across, and it reaches heights of eight to 14 feet tall when it is flowering. The central stem is hollow, with purple blotches and coarse white hairs emerging from it. Clusters of small white flowers, similar in appearance to Queen Anne's Lace, form a large umbrella shape at the top of the plant.

The sap of the plant is quite dangerous. It contains chemicals called photosensitizing furanocoumarins which can cause a person's skin to lose the ability to protect itself from sunlight. Exposure to the sap and sunlight can result in severe skin burns, blistering, and permanent scarring. Contact with the eyes can even result in blindness.

Giant hogweed is native to the Caucasus Region that separates Europe and Asia near the Black and Caspian Seas. Over the last century, it has spread across Europe and into North America after being introduced into non-native areas as an ornamental plant. Currently, the plant is found in most regions of New York State, with higher concentrations located in Western and Central New York.

Sightings of giant hogweed should be reported to the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). It is especially helpful to provide the specific location of the plant along with high resolution photos of it to confirm its identification.

Anybody coming across a giant hogweed plant should take care and avoid touching the plant.

To report a sighting of Giant Hogweed, please contact the DEC by phone at (845) 256-3111 or via email at [ghogweed@dec.ny.gov](mailto:ghogweed@dec.ny.gov). More information about this invasive species can be found at [www.dec.ny.gov/animals/39809.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/39809.html).



Donations of produce at a food bank.  
(Photo courtesy of the New York Farm Bureau.)

## From the Farm to the Food Bank

New York farmers are setting records, not just in food production, but also in food donations.

While hunger prevention often receives great attention during the end-of-year holiday season, it is a year-round issue being addressed by many organizations, including food banks.

Last year was a record-setting year, with farmers donating more than 10 million pounds to food banks across the State. Donations were collected and distributed to the State's ten food banks through the "Harvest for All" program that connects food banks and farm bureaus across the country. New York Farm Bureau members from every corner of the State generously contributed to this effort last year.

New York State is renowned for its wide range of agricultural products, and the donations reflected this diversity. Farm products such as jams, jellies, and maple syrup were donated. Yogurt and other dairy products, produce, and even beef and venison were all provided in a statewide effort to combat hunger.

It is no surprise, therefore, that the farmers who work every day to raise, grow, and produce our food step up to the dinner plate in an effort to fight hunger.

## A National Symbol in the Empire State

*Bald Eagles in New York*

The bald eagle is an impressive raptor, even if Benjamin Franklin did not think much of the bird that became our nation's symbol.

With its white head and tail, brown body, curved yellow bill, and piercing eyes, the bald eagle is a distinctive bird of prey. They are easily recognized when reaching adulthood, but juvenile bald eagles have brown and white feathers. They do not develop their white head and tail feathers until they are roughly five years old, making them more difficult to identify.

According to the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), the number of bald eagles in New York State dropped dramatically decades ago, resulting in only one single known pair of nesting eagles in the State in 1976. Efforts to restore the bald eagle within the State have been successful, with DEC reporting that there were 173 pairs of nesting eagles in 2009.

It is an encouraging trend. Just this year, New York City media reported sightings of a pair of bald eagles nesting in Staten Island.

For the best opportunities to view bald eagles, DEC recommends visiting certain sites along waterways where they spend their winters before returning to their nests in the spring.

Even though winter may provide the best chance to see a bald eagle, sharp eyes may discover a national symbol majestically soaring above a New York lake or river, regardless of the season.

*For more information about viewing bald eagles in New York State, please visit [www.dec.ny.gov/animals/9378.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/9378.html).*



Game of Logging participants listen to their instructor, Mr. Bill Lindloff, while he discusses a safe tree-felling plan. (Photo courtesy of New York Center for Agricultural Medicine and Health.)

## More than a Game

*Safety Training for Logging*

When a tree is felled in the woods, it definitely makes a sound. Mr. Bill Lindloff, who spends much of the year training individuals on how to safely cut down trees, works hard to ensure the logger is around afterward to verify that fact.

Mr. Lindloff runs ProCuts, providing essential safety training to professional and novice loggers alike using a competitive program called "Game of Logging."

His experience extends back to 1985 when he first began cutting down trees. He later became a competitive logger, and now his full-time role consists of providing logging safety training.

Students taking a Game of Logging course begin by learning about personal protective equipment, chainsaw maintenance and sharpening, and the nature of reactive forces on a chainsaw. Yet, this is no day in a classroom. It is a practical experience where students spend the day in the woods. Ideally, students bring the same chainsaws that they will personally use for logging, whether in a commercial setting or on their own property. Rain or shine, students practice the skills used in logging. Later they fell their own tree, all while being carefully watched and coached by Mr. Lindloff.

Throughout the day, students are graded on their performance. Points are awarded for safe actions and deducted when rules are not followed. It is a competitive scoring process that enhances the training and reinforces the lessons being learned.

The course content is the same for both professional and novice loggers. Experienced loggers find it helpful in reestablishing safe habits, and novices gain significant knowledge and experience.

*The New York Center for Agricultural Medicine and Health (NYCAMH) offers farmers and landowners with opportunities to participate in Game of Logging training at a reduced cost. This year, NYCAMH hopes to partner with Mr. Lindloff to hold 20 classes to train 200 students. For more information, please visit [nycamh.com/programs/gameoflogging](http://nycamh.com/programs/gameoflogging).*

## Rural Advocacy

For many people, the connection to a rural life disappeared generations ago, or never existed at all. The challenges faced by those living in rural areas are very different from those in suburban or urban settings. Far too often, people unfamiliar with rural life are left with outdated concepts or stereotypical portrayals from movies and television.

That is why it is important to share the rural stories that provide an accurate depiction of the benefits, challenges, and daily life of people living in rural New York State. With the expanding reach of today's social media platforms, doing so is more feasible than ever.

Sharing these stories is more than an attempt to change someone's mind about a specific issue. Often, the process of sharing stories about rural life becomes an informative narrative and an opportunity to generate a useful two-way conversation.

For agriculture in particular, the Cornell Small Farms Program provides relevant resources from a workshop conducted a couple years ago. These resources cover a wide range of topics including photography, interview skills, fact-finding, stylistic suggestions, and more.

For example, an increasing number of farmers are sharing photos via social media that document their daily lives and how they care for their animals and crops. Doing so has opened dialogues with people interested in how the food they eat is produced. And while disagreement on some issues can almost be guaranteed, it need not sidetrack the conversation.

Clearly, these discussions are important tools for anyone interested in sharing more about life in rural New York State.

*To access the resources provided by the Cornell Small Farms Program, please visit [smallfarms.cornell.edu/2014/09/11/telling-better-stories](http://smallfarms.cornell.edu/2014/09/11/telling-better-stories).*

## National Recognition for a New York State Park



Without a doubt, New York's State Parks are impressive. One in particular has three large waterfalls, a river quickly flowing through deep gorges, beautiful forests, and miles of trails for hiking, biking, horseback riding, skiing, and snowmobiling. In the midst of last winter's frigid temperatures, this park garnered national media attention as a 50-foot "ice volcano" formed from a small geyser.

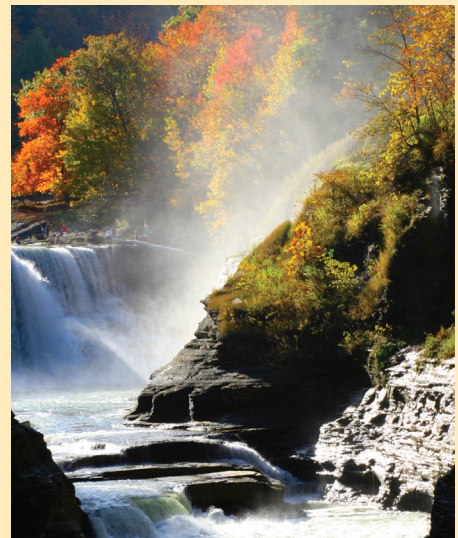
In recognition of the scenic views created as the Genesee River carves a path through forested cliffs, Letchworth State Park is often called the "Grand Canyon of the East." This year, the park can also be called the best in the nation.

Earlier this year, a USA Today 10Best Reader's Choice poll concluded with Letchworth State Park at the top of the list. A third place finish by Watkins Glen State Park provides further evidence that New York State Parks are among the nation's best.

The future looks bright for Letchworth State Park. Recently, ground was broken for a nature center that is expected to open next year. The new facility will include classroom and meeting space, a research lab, a butterfly garden, and interactive exhibits.

The park is open year-round, and there are always plenty of activities and sights for visitors to enjoy.

*To plan a visit to Letchworth State Park, please visit [nysparks.com/parks/79/details.aspx](http://nysparks.com/parks/79/details.aspx).*



### Take a Wild Hike

For visitors to the Wild Center, in Tupper Lake, New York, the suggestion to “take a hike” should not be construed as an insult. Rather, it is an opportunity to experience a new perspective on a walk through the woods.

The Wild Walk is a brand new attraction at this museum located in the heart of the Adirondacks. It is no ordinary trail through wooded areas. Instead, a series of bridges and other elements takes visitors on a journey through the trees – 30 feet in the air.

Among its features is a large version of an eagle’s nest where visitors take in the view from the highest point of the walk. There is also a giant spider’s web, allowing guests to traverse a web of cargo netting suspended more than two stories above the ground.



A view from the nest. (Photo courtesy of the Wild Center.)

The Wild Center has much more to offer beyond this exciting journey through the treetops. There are many opportunities to learn more about the Adirondacks, such as hands-on experiences, shows, ground-level trails, and live exhibits including fish and river otters.

*For more information about the Wild Walk and the Wild Center, or to plan a trip, please visit [wildcenter.org](http://wildcenter.org).*

### USDA Rural Development’s Community Facilities Program



The St. Lawrence County Fire Training Facility, Inc., in St. Lawrence County, received a \$14,000 Community Facilities Grant to install electrical work in their training facility. The facility is critical for volunteer firefighters as they conduct mandatory training. (Photo courtesy of USDA Rural Development.)

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is seeking applications for loans and grants through USDA Rural Development’s Community Facilities program. This program finances essential community facilities in rural areas and towns of up to 20,000 in population. These facilities include childcare centers, hospitals, medical clinics, assisted living facilities, fire and rescue stations, police stations, community centers, public buildings, and transportation systems. Given their importance, USDA strives to ensure that facilities like these are available to all rural residents. Funds are available to public bodies, non-profit organizations, and tribal governments. Applications are accepted on an ongoing basis.

During the past five years, USDA Rural Development has invested more than \$82 Million in rural New York through the Community Facilities program.

*For more information on this program, including information on how to apply, please contact USDA Rural Development at (315) 477-6400.*

## SAVE THE DATES!



**Empire Farm Days  
August 11 - 13, 2015**

Rodman Lott & Son Farms  
Seneca Falls, NY  
[empirefarmdays.com](http://empirefarmdays.com)



**New York State  
Association for Rural Health  
14th Annual Conference  
October 1-2, 2015**

Ramada Geneva Lakefront, Geneva, NY  
[nysarh.org](http://nysarh.org)



**The Great New York State Fair  
August 27 - September 7, 2015**

New York State Fairgrounds, Syracuse, NY  
[nysfair.org](http://nysfair.org)



**NYSARC Annual Conference  
October 22 – October 24, 2015**

Hilton Albany, Albany, NY  
[nysarc.org](http://nysarc.org)

**If you have any suggestions for upcoming editions,  
Please email the Commission at [RURALRES@NYSENATE.GOV](mailto:RURALRES@NYSENATE.GOV)**