



## A Resource Guide for Start-up Military Veteran Farmers

Crystal Kyle, Graduate Research Assistant, Department of Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education, Virginia Tech; Kim Niewolny, Associate Professor and Extension Specialist, Department of Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education, Virginia Tech; Don Ohanehi, Instructor, Department of Engineering Education, Virginia Tech; Kirk Ballin, Program Coordinator, AgrAbility Virginia; Joe Young, Service Coordinator, AgrAbility Virginia; Steve Bridge, Service Coordinator, AgrAbility Virginia; Tristan Robertson, Community Director, Easter Seals UCP

AgrAbility Virginia and the Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition Program have prepared this document to assist military veterans in and near Virginia who are interested in agriculture or starting a farm. The purpose of this document is to present information and resources that are available to you as a military veteran. This publication is not intended to be used as a comprehensive resource guide but a useful starting point. For more information:

Please contact AgrAbility Virginia: [www.agrabilityvirginia.org](http://www.agrabilityvirginia.org)

Visit Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition Program: [www.vabeginningfarmer.org](http://www.vabeginningfarmer.org)

### Introduction

Deciding what career to begin after discharging from the military is an important decision. Because agriculture can often bring a new sense of purpose and leadership to a veteran's life, many are choosing farming as their new career. Military veterans offer unique skill sets and discipline that are needed in the rigorous daily life of a farmer. Veterans receive a lot of on the job training, formal education, and tactical skills while in the military. Additionally, they contribute leadership, technical, and entrepreneurial skills to the agriculture community (USDA, 2015). Similarly, veterans need a challenging career that compares with the demanding life style of the military to ease the adjustment back into civilian life. For these and other reasons, U.S. government agencies are beginning to provide exclusive resources to military veterans to enter into agricultural opportunities (USDA, n.d.).

AgrAbility Virginia is a statewide program that assists individuals and their families who farm, and have illnesses, injuries or disabilities that are impeding their ability to work safely, effectively, and productively. They provide military veterans with services in the form of education materials, networks, and adaptive tools to make work on a farm more accessible. More specifically, they assist in modifying farm and ranch operations, provide adaptive equipment, increase accessibility to machinery and areas on the farm, provide economic counseling, and identify funding available. For more information visit: [www.agrabilityvirginia.org](http://www.agrabilityvirginia.org) or contact Kirk Ballin, program coordinator, at [kirk.ballin@eastersealsucp.com](mailto:kirk.ballin@eastersealsucp.com) or 1-800-365-1656.

The Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition Program (VBFRCP) is a state-wide and coalition-based Extension program improving opportunities for beginning farmers and ranchers to establish and sustain viable agricultural operations and communities in Virginia. The program offers whole farm planning curriculum and training, online resources, social networking, and farmer mentoring. One outreach goal held by the VBFRP is to support military veterans who are interested in starting a farm by connecting them with educational resources, trainings, and agricultural networks needed for successful entry and sustainability. For more information, visit [www.vabeginningfarmer.org](http://www.vabeginningfarmer.org) or contact Kim Niewolny, Program Director and Extension Specialist, at [niewolny@vt.edu](mailto:niewolny@vt.edu) or 540-231-5784.

### **Networking is Essential**

Networking and comradery shared within the military veteran community is extremely beneficial in all aspects of a new career in agriculture. It is not only important for overall health and safety as you begin a farm enterprise, it is estimated that 65 to 80 percent of today's jobs are found through networking (Career Key, n.d.). AgrAbility Virginia and the Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition Program are excellent places to begin your networking and on-farm planning process. They will provide you with resources and organizational connections to help get you started.

### **Four tips for Networking!**

1. Know yourself and identify your goals.
2. Inventory your contacts.
3. Know what you want from associates.
4. Bring a mutually supportive attitude.

Source: U.S. *News and World Report* section on careers (Networking Tactics for Veterans)

### **Educational Options for Military Veterans**

There are at least three main educational options available to veterans when they desire to learn about farming: 1) on the job internships; 2) technical training; 3) formal education. The Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) is awarded to both military members and military veterans for a duration of 36 months and can be used for financial assistance during technical training or towards earning a degree (USDA, 2015). The Post 9/11 GI Bill is awarded to combat veterans and can be used to receive a larger fund or receive one more year of educational funds. The Reserve and National Guard (who were activated for at least 90 days after September 11, 2001) may be eligible for the Reserve Educational Assistance Program (REAP)(USDA, 2015).

Most educational institutions will have a veteran liaison and some will include an office dedicated to veterans returning to school. "Mapping Success" is a website that contains a benefits calculator to help you estimate the amount of funds available under the Post 9/11 GI Bill. It also shows you college options. If you would like more information, visit: [www.gibill.va.gov/apply-for-benefits/road-map](http://www.gibill.va.gov/apply-for-benefits/road-map). Also visit [www.newgibill.org](http://www.newgibill.org) for information specifically for the Post 9/11 GI Bill. It will direct you to the non-profit Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA). This site contains information on veteran benefit resources.

## **Farmer Training Programs**

There are local and national training programs that will prepare you for daily chores and tasks on a farm. Most use a group or internship approach to learning. Here is short list of hands-on training programs and courses designed *exclusively* for the military veteran that you might find useful. To learn about more training opportunities, or to learn more about these options, please contact the Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition Program. For example, the VBFRCP offers whole farm planning trainings and resources for farm start-up that applies to a wide diversity of new and beginning farmers. It is important you find the program that works best for your farming goals, learning needs, and personal interests.

### **Virginia Programs (selected)**

- Arcadia's Center for Food and Sustainable Agriculture
  - *Arcadia's Veteran Farmer Program in Virginia.* Starting in 2016, military veterans were able to participate in a hands-on agriculture training program. It includes growing for Virginia's local market, encourage entrepreneurship, and agriculture job creation. This program is provided through three components: 1. Veteran Farmer Reserve Program; 2. Veteran Farm Fellowship Program; 3. and the Veteran Farmer Land Access.
  - *The Veteran Farm Fellowship Program* is an intensive training program. Veteran Farm Fellows study and work full time at Arcadia Farm in Northern Virginia. The Fellows participate in all aspects of Arcadia's mission, including food access and distribution, sourcing, working with local chefs and retailers, and farm and nutrition education. Fellows work 40-50-hour work weeks and participate in the Farmer Reserve weekend program.

Visit: <http://arcadiafood.org/> for more information on these programs from Arcadia.

### **National Farmer Programs (selected)**

- Veteran Farmer Coalition (FVC)- The FVC is a national resource that has proven useful for national networking and state chapter development. Their website provides names of many other programs across the U.S. and offers some guidance. Visit them for more training opportunities for military veterans: <http://www.farmvetco.org/>
- Homegrown by Heroes (HBH) - is a branding and marketing tool used by military veteran farmers, ranchers, fishermen, and producers to let consumers know that the products they are buying are from military veterans. Apply at: <http://www.tfaforms.com/327550>
- Horticultural Therapy (HT) - is a free service provided by Liberty Farms. It trains military veterans and their families to run a small agriculture practice and provides all the equipment and support they need to become farmers in a small space (750-5500 sq ft). Visit: <http://libertyfarmco.com/> for more information on this program.
- Combat Boots to Cowboy Boots – This program offers agricultural classes and job training and placement at local farms and ranches. Visit at: [www.ncta.unl.edu](http://www.ncta.unl.edu).

## **Adaptive Agriculture Tools**

Advances in technology and medical care during recent wars have produced more combat veteran survivors than ever before (Gerber, 2009). These veterans are returning home with amputated limbs, back, spinal, and/or other injuries. Goldberg (2014) reports there are at least 1,200 amputees from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars alone. With this high rate of injuries, many veterans choosing to begin farming will need adaptive tools. AgrAbility Virginia retrofits devices or structures and suggest adjusted work practices for farmers. Some solutions include reformatted tractors and self-propelled equipment, crop and supplies management, shop tools, livestock handling and housing, and mobility (National AgrAbility Project, n.d.).

## **Mental Health Resources Available to Military Veterans**

Many military veterans have mental health concerns and needs, including those who experience the challenges of Post Traumatic Syndrome Disorder (PTSD). The Veteran Affairs (2015) estimates as many as 30 percent of combat veterans experience PTSD. Farming can be stressful and you may need additional resources to help cope with stress. Listed below are some local Virginia and national resources.

### **Virginia Resources**

- Emergency and Crisis Mental Health Services in Virginia – The Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services offers links to local resources. Visit: <http://www.dbhds.virginia.gov/SVC-CSBs.asp>
- Virginia Community Services Boards Links - to VACSB web page with search engine links for all CSBs in the state. Visit: <http://www.vacsb.org/directory.html>.
- AgrAbility Virginia is an excellent resource for mental health information pertaining to farm families. Please find more information by visiting [www.agrabilityvirginia.org](http://www.agrabilityvirginia.org)

### **National Resources**

- PTSD Coach Mobile App - offers trustworthy information on PTSD and effective tools for identifying and tracking your PTSD symptoms; convenient, easy-to-use skills to help you handle stress symptoms; direct links to support and help; and is available 24/7. Download app at: <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/pages/ptsdcoach.asp>.
- US Department of Veterans Affairs- provides treatment, support, educational material and links to services for a wide array of substance abuse related topics. Visit at: <http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/substanceabuse.asp> for more information.
- US Department of Veterans Affairs - provides treatment, support, educational material and links to services for numerous mental health related topics. Find at: <http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/>.
- National Arability's website offers a wealth of information for veterans. Visit at: <http://www.agrability.org/resources/veterans/#caregiver> for more information.

Source: *Virginia Department of Veterans Services* section on Mental Health

## **Conclusion**

The information provided in this fact sheet is a quick reference. This guide is designed to introduce you to basic resources and services that you may find useful as you begin your farm enterprise as a military veteran. There is a lot to consider when starting a farm. Additional resources are available to military veterans. Below is list of resources available to you as you take your next step.

As part of that next step, we recommend contacting the AgrAbility Virginia Program and the Virginia Beginning Farmer & Rancher Coalition Program (see above and below for contact information). Both programs are supported by the Virginia Cooperative Extension System. Virginia Cooperative Extension contains a number of professionals and experts in the field of agriculture who can help you plan and develop your farm. Your local Virginia Cooperative Extension office has a number of resources for farmers, as well as agents to answer your questions: [www.ext.vt.edu](http://www.ext.vt.edu).

## **Resources**

- Career Key. (n.d.). Networking. Retrieved from [https://www.careerkey.org/choose-a-career/networking.html#.V546\\_fkrLIU](https://www.careerkey.org/choose-a-career/networking.html#.V546_fkrLIU)
- Gerber, D. (2009). Creating Group Identity: Disabled Veterans and American Government. *OAH Magazine of History*, 23(3), 23-28.
- Goldberg, M. (2014). Updated Death and Injury Rates of U.S. Military Personnel During the Conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Retrieved from [https://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/113th\\_congress2013-2014/workingpaper/49837\\_Casualties\\_WorkingPaper-2014-08\\_1.pdf](https://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/113th_congress2013-2014/workingpaper/49837_Casualties_WorkingPaper-2014-08_1.pdf)
- Gudmundsson, P. (2016). 4 Networking Tactics for Veterans. Retrieved from <http://money.usnews.com/money/blogs/outside-voices-careers/2015/09/01/4-networking-tactics-for-veterans>
- Mental Health Services (n.d.). Virginia Department of Veterans Services. Retrieved from <http://www.dvs.virginia.gov/virginia-veteran-and-family-support/resources/mental-health-services/>
- National AgrAbility Project. (n.d.). Assistive Technology. Retrieved from <http://www.agrability.org/resources/at/>
- USDA. (2015). Technical assistance and resources for veterans. Retrieved from <http://www.nal.usda.gov/technical-assistance-and-resources-veterans>
- USDA. (n.d.). Information for Veterans. Retrieved from <https://www.outreach.usda.gov/veterans.htm>
- USDA. (2015). Veterans in Agriculture. Retrieved from <http://www.nal.usda.gov/veteran-farmers>
- VA. (2015). How Common is PTSD? Retrieved from <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/PTSD/overview/basics/how-common-is-ptsd.asp>



**AgrAbility Virginia Program** is funded by the AgrAbility Project, USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), Special Project 2014-2018 (41590-22326). Administered by Virginia Tech, Easter Seals UCP North Carolina & Virginia, Inc. and Virginia Cooperative Extension. Visit us at: [www.agrabilityvirginia.org](http://www.agrabilityvirginia.org).



**The Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition Program** is funded by the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) of the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) Award #2015-70017-22887. Administered by Virginia Tech and Virginia Cooperative Extension. Visit us at: [www.vabeginningfarmer.org](http://www.vabeginningfarmer.org).



Virginia Cooperative Extension programs and employment are open to all, regardless of age, color, disability, gender, gender identity, gender expression, national origin, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, veteran status, or any other basis protected by law. An equal opportunity/affirmative action employer. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Virginia State University, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture cooperating. Edwin J. Jones, Director, Virginia Cooperative Extension, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg; M. Ray McKinnie, Administrator, 1890 Extension Program, Virginia State University, Petersburg.