



## From Handshakes to Health Care, A Message to Kentucky Farmers: You Are Appreciated!

A Special Publication From the Kentucky Department of Agriculture's Raising Hope Program  
to Kentucky's farmers, their neighbors and friends.

# It's Time to Head to the Barn

The Kentucky Department of Agriculture Division of Farm Safety and Rural Health has a clear message for farmers: We will meet you at the barn.

The MASH Barn, that is.

The Mobile Agriculture Safety and Health Barn made its debut in Daviess County on July 26. It will be on hand at ag events across Kentucky to provide farmers a comfortable environment as they receive preventative health screenings and educational materials through KDA's Raising Hope initiative.

The mobile unit was dedicated to Dr. Cheryl Witt. Dr. Witt writes more about the MASH Barn on page 2.



## From Agriculture Commissioner Jonathan Shell:

Farmers live and work for a higher purpose. They provide the food and fiber their families need, and the food and fiber needs of this state, this country, and this world.

Taking care of their land and livestock, sometimes from sun-up to sundown, takes a dedication not everyone has. It takes someone special to take on the risks, the hard work, and the long hours.

Though it's a fulfilling profession, farming isn't always easy. Fluctuating crop prices, debt, and the high cost of farming can create significant financial strain. Along with that, the physical nature of farming and the risk of injuries presents its own unique challenges.

Combine these factors with the overall unpredictability of farming and this year's rainy spring and you have some farmers feeling anxious.

For Kentucky, 2025 has been the wettest start to the year on record. January through April 2025 saw a statewide average of 26.42 inches of rain for a state that only averages around 47 inches annually.

The excessive rain prevented farmers from getting into the fields, led to delayed planting, and has potentially shortened growing seasons. A rainy spring brings a mix of emotions for farmers, ranging from frustration and anxiety to cautious optimism.

But farmers are resilient and most have adapted to the rainy weather by shifting planting intentions and managing saturated fields. But this all comes with added pressure and stress.

The Kentucky Department of Agriculture's

Raising Hope program seeks to recognize that stress and help farmers and producers find a way to work through it.

Raising Hope is a program that focuses on farm safety, farmer's health, and farm rescue. The program seeks to raise awareness, including dangers of routine activities on the farm, the health risks on the farm, and the needed training for farm specific rescues. The goal is to encourage farmers to take extra steps to keep themselves, their workers, and their families safe.

While physical health is a top priority, Raising Hope also places a strong emphasis on the mental welfare of farmers. The program encourages discussions surrounding whole wellness, extending support by offering valuable resources such as specialized training, including QPR training, access to the 988 crisis hotline, fundamental first-aid and CPR training, and tailored assistance from experts well-versed in agricultural practices. If you need someone to talk to now go to <https://988lifeline.org>.

Raising Hope, which began as a coalition between the Kentucky Department of Agriculture and other agriculture, education, and healthcare institutions, fully moved under the KDA umbrella and joined with the Department's Farm Safety program in 2024.

Together, with its partners, Raising Hope recognizes the value of a farmer's whole health and strives to protect the people that choose the profession that nourishes the country.

The agriculture producers that farm Kentucky's more than 69,000 farms are a special



**Jonathan Shell**

Kentucky Agriculture Commissioner

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class of people. Without them, our communities suffer. With them, our communities thrive.

With almost half of its land used in some sort of agricultural pursuit, Kentucky is still very much an agriculture-based state. It's that very reason the Kentucky Department of Agriculture works to strengthen their reserves, fight for their rights, and help them achieve their goals. The Raising Hope program is just one way we set out to do just that.

For more information on Raising Hope go to [kyagr.com/marketing/raising-hope.html](http://kyagr.com/marketing/raising-hope.html).



## Introducing the Ky. Department of Agriculture Division of Farm Safety and Rural Health

The farm safety program has long been an important part of the Kentucky Department of Agriculture.

Almost three decades ago, Dale Dobson agreed to lead the program. He had already gained a reputation for uniting emergency services and the farm community to teach farm safety to farmers — and farm rescue skills to emergency responders — across the state.

Over time, the program became the hub of a shared vision: reducing farm accidents through education, training and awareness. Dobson and his team carried their message throughout Kentucky, setting up at schools, farms, fire departments, and anywhere else that would bring them closer to their goal of

serving farmers and emergency personnel.

The program's history is rich with collaboration involving agribusiness, farm organizations, emergency responders, and educators. Donations and financial support through KDA have made possible elaborate mock rescue scenes, a tractor rollover simulator, mobile education units, and other hands-on demonstrations that leave a lasting impact.

As the industry evolved, so did the program, and there's no doubt that lives have been saved.

Through Dobson and KDA, an idea eventually emerged: provide affordable life-saving tools and training for grain bin rescues so local organizations would be equipped when emergencies arose. It's exactly this kind of in-

novation that has earned widespread respect for the farm safety program.

Today, parented by Raising Hope — a key arm of KDA focused on farmer safety as well as physical and mental health — the program continues to adapt as agriculture changes. Recognizing its value, Commissioner of Agriculture Jonathan Shell made the decision to elevate KDA's safety and health efforts even further.

Effective July 1, 2025, Commissioner Shell established a new Division of Farm Safety and Rural Health. Dale Dobson now serves as division director and will lead the way in ensuring farmers' health and safety remain integral parts of the Kentucky Department of Agriculture for years to come.



# MASH Barn brings vital services to places farmers gather



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I am a practical person and believe that there is “more than one way to skin a cat” (no offense intended; it’s just a saying). Whenever someone says, “That won’t work because...,” or “we don’t have time,” or “they don’t offer that here,” or “we’ve never done it that way,” I ask, “Why not?” and “What if we did xxx?”

Country life teaches us to “make do,” and we figure out how to make things work with what we have. We do so because we either don’t have the money, time, or access to what we need.

As I started my career promoting the health of farmers and farm families in Kentucky, it was no different.

Farming is land and family. We need our fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, kids and grandkids healthy and around us for as long as possible. One void due to an accident, illness or death impacts the entire family, farm operation and community.

I have discussed many times the barriers associated with health in our agricultural communities: rural health access, cultural health barriers (“I ain’t got time for that”), and occupational demands (“I gotta get this hay in” or “Who’ll milk the cows?”) that keep folks from important preventative health screenings or help for their physical/mental health.

It seemed practical to me to bring education, training, and health screenings directly



Dr. Cheryl Witt and Miss Kentucky Ariana Rodriguez point to a plaque that recognizes Dr. Witt’s efforts through Raising Hope. The MASH Barn was a vision of Dr. Witt’s. They are taking part in a Family and Farm Ag Day in Owensboro, where the MASH Barn was unveiled.

to farmers at events they would likely attend during a time of day or harvest schedule that would make it easier for them to participate.

This makes good horse sense. Hence, the boots-on-the-ground of bringing education, training, and health screenings to the farmer at events held in barns, fields, extension offices or the like began.

What also makes good horse sense is a place to work that minimizes cancellation from bad weather. Let’s also make it an environment that farmers find relaxing and comfortable, which facilitates participation.

This led me to envision some type of unit that would allow a portable, weather-proof space where we could haul supplies and deliver services while providing a relaxing environment for farmers. I mentioned this to Dale Dobson and, of course, he made it happen.

And, what could be a better answer and a

dream than a mobile barn?

The MASH (Mobile Agriculture Safety and Health) Barn is just the place! Asking farmers to come by “The Barn” and chat is just as natural as asking them to stop by Southern States or the Extension office, and most will go without hesitation.

Now, through Raising Hope and the Kentucky Department of Agriculture’s Division of Farm Safety and Rural Health, the MASH Barn helps provide vital safety and health education, screenings, and training – keeping farmers healthy and able to do what they love for as long as possible.

Not everyone hits their ultimate professional goal, but I can honestly say that helping launch this division — complete with the equipment to serve our farmers and their families — has truly completed my professional bucket list.

## I can hear the birds!

### Hearing loss does not have to be an expected outcome from farming

For most of my life, I thought hearing loss was just part of being a farmer. When you spend your life around farm equipment, you get used to the constant roar.

Over the years, I’ve met thousands of folks across this state, and I’ve never let what I considered “just bad hearing” slow me down. I certainly didn’t think it needed “fixing.”

That mindset changed in August of 2024 at the Kentucky State Fair.

As usual, I was making my rounds with my friend and colleague, Dr. Cheryl Witt, talking with farm families and catching up with old friends. Cheryl is always scouting for ways to strengthen our Raising Hope Farm Safety & Health initiative, and that day she spotted something new – the KY HEARS mobile hearing unit. Immediately, she started talking with Dr. Devon Woodlee, who was running the exhibit, about partnering with us.

Before I knew it, the two of them had convinced me to take a hearing test.

The results didn’t surprise anyone – except me. I hadn’t realized just how much I wasn’t hearing. Dr. Woodlee connected me with the Heuser Hearing Institute, and before long, I was fitted with hearing aids.

When I walked outside wearing them for the first time, I stopped dead in my tracks.

“I can hear the birds.”

That moment still gives me chills. Something so simple – birds singing – hit me like a ton of bricks. I think Cheryl even wiped away a tear watching me.

Since then, life hasn’t been the same. It’s better. Clearer. Fuller.

And now I can truly talk to farmers about hearing loss because I’ve lived it. I can tell them my story – how easy the process was, how well the KY HEARS and Heuser Hearing Institute teams treated me, and how much it has changed my daily life for the



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better. Drs. Woodlee and Witt gave me more than medical care – they opened up a whole new chapter.

In the year since my first visit, our partnership with KY HEARS has grown. They’ve come alongside Raising Hope at events all over rural Kentucky, offering screenings not only for hearing, but also blood pressure, diabetes and vision. These events aren’t just medical; they’re about restoring connection, confidence, and quality of life in farm communities.

I’ve always believed farm

safety and health go hand-in-hand. Hearing health isn’t just about sound – it’s about being able to work safely, communicate with the people you love, and enjoy the world around you.

I know this: every bird song I hear now reminds me that good healthcare doesn’t change lives unless it reaches the people who need it. Thanks to partnerships like this one, more Kentucky farmers are finally getting that chance.

Life is good, and hearing it makes it even better.

## Handshakes change the world

Growing up on a fifth-generation family farm in LaRue County, I knew the joys and discomforts of agricultural life, learning from those lessons to strengthen my resolve.

Being around those associations led to a lifelong friendship that has led to a lifelong passion to make a positive difference.

I remember Dale Dobson coming to our agricultural classes and conducting seminars for students at the Kentucky FFA Leadership Training Center on the subject of farm safety. His approach always was based on making good decisions on and off the farm. With years of farming and first responder experience, Dale knew how to reach crowds with a commonsense approach, using visual appeal and emotional connection.

Through a handshake, I enjoyed helping Dale at local farm safety symposiums, serving as a victim or helping attendees with ques-



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tions. During my senior year, while serving as the Lincoln Trail Regional FFA President, I was charged with setting up a farm safety display at the Kentucky State Fair. I knew where to go...Dale set me up! With miniature displays, equipment, signage and materials... our exhibit not only looked the best...but influenced people to make good decisions!

Dale went on to begin his career at the

Kentucky Department of Agriculture, serving as a Farm Safety Coordinator. Over the years, his program became a national model, dramatically decreasing the number of farm related accidents and deaths across our Commonwealth and nation.

While I served as a State Representative in the Kentucky General Assembly, Dale came to me in 2019 with a concept. With an increase in farmer suicides and mental health issues, Dale wanted to bring awareness and create an avenue for resources.

With HCR 62, Farmer Suicide Prevention Day was established in the Commonwealth to coincide with National Farm Safety Week. On Sept. 18 of that year, the governor signed a proclamation, and we celebrated farmers at the Capitol...which would eventually lead to our annual Farmers’ Appreciation Celebration.

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# Fire chief involved in two grain bin rescues says training, equipment change everything

Grain bin entrapments don't outnumber tractor accidents on farms in Kentucky, but reported incidents have increased year over year. A first responder from Morganfield can attest to the danger involved: Dale Pierce, chief of the Whispering Meadows Fire Department, has been involved in two life-or-death situations where a farmer was trapped, almost swallowed up by grain.

"It's not part of fire training," Chief Pierce said, for getting a Firefighter 1 level certification. But, since there are so many grain bins locally, it's something that his station in Union County "took upon ourselves to become efficient in," he added.

UK's Southeast Center for Ag Health and Injury Prevents reports there were nearly 400 entrapments recorded over the last decade in the state, with 38 incidents in 2019 – a 27 percent increase over the previous year.

Pierce's training was first put to test back in 2022, when he and others worked for hours to save farmer Doug Omer. They didn't have all of the specialized equipment then they have now, which is one of the reasons it took more than six hours to successfully complete the rescue.

The rescue was something to see, Pierce said, including amazing skills by paramedics and other firefighters.

The second incident just happened in June of this year. A worker on Jim Bickett's farm was caught in a bin, and the rescue required multi-

ple departments' manpower and a ladder truck.

"This time, I had a Turtle Tube, but it wasn't enough to get him completely out."

The tube was created with help from Dale Dobson, director of the Kentucky Department of Agriculture Division of Farm Safety and Rural Health.

Pierce said they also used what is called "The Great Wall," which is brought up in pieces so it will fit into the bin where it is then assembled around the victim.

"What many don't realize is the force it takes to pull them out from under the heavy grain," he said, which takes anywhere from 400 to 600 pounds. "But if they are fully engulfed, it takes about 2,000 pounds of force."

Pierce and the team got the farmhand out in three hours, due to proficiency learned from the first incident and training.

"I hate to say 'practice makes perfect,' but that's the case. I'd rather practice than have scenarios, but we have an excellent, dedicated group of firefighters – and other first responders around this area," Pierce said. The recently developed equipment helped to increase responders' efficiency, he added. "Without the team, there would've been fatalities instead of rescues."

The training Pierce and others received started with KDA and has grown into multiple layers of trainers across the state, providing the necessary resources to save lives!

**By Bobbie Curd**  
**Field Reporter for The Farmer's Pride**



## REED: Handshakes change the world

Continued from previous page  
tion.

That next year in 2020, tobacco funds were allocated to begin the (Farmer Mental Health/Awareness) Raising Hope Program. With \$500,000 allocated in each fiscal year from 2021-2024, awareness and resources were being dedicated to make a positive difference and save lives.

Then in 2024, based on those wins, I arranged for \$1 million each fiscal year to fund the Raising Hope Program, which is now housed at the Kentucky Department of Agriculture. Through a division reorganization in 2025, the

Raising Hope banner now encompasses the Farmer Safety, Rescue and Health initiatives of the KDA.

Through Director Dale Dobson's vision, passion and collaboration... this program is a huge success, second to none!

Handshakes change the world... one person...one conversation at a time.

I value my friendship with Dale Dobson, proud of his endeavor and blessed to play a small role in his dream to make a positive difference! Thank you to all our farmers, your sacrifice, dedication and commitment to feed, clothe and shelter the world...You are appreciated! #RaisingHope

## Coin Challenge reaches White House

A conversation about ways to prevent farm suicide turned into an idea that is now reaching across the nation with a message of hope and appreciation.

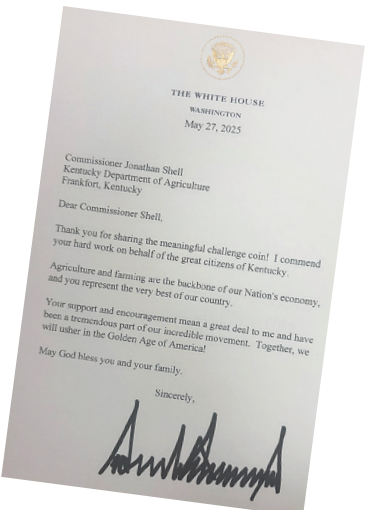
In Kentucky, 25,000 coins have been handed out with a message of hope and an urgent request for people to reach out if they need help.

The "You Are Appreciated" coin project has now even reached the White House, with Agriculture Commissioner Jonathan Shell sharing the program with President Donald Trump.

Commissioner Shell carries coins with him. FFA students across the state are participating.

Dale Dobson, director of the Kentucky Department of Agriculture Division of Farm Safety and Rural Health, has personally shaken 2,829 hands.

This program is about one thing: letting farmers know, "You Are Appreciated."



## Education is a big part of agriculture safety



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**Hutson School of Agriculture**  
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Agriculture is unique in many ways. For those involved in production agriculture, specifically, it is more than a job, career, or something you do. It's a way of life and your identity.

Agriculture roots run very deep in farming communities all across the nation. This can be seen when these communities come together for a common purpose such as helping a neighbor or family in need. And these people don't think twice about doing it.

Unfortunately, agriculture includes more than values and a way of life. Accidents have plagued the agriculture industry for a long time. Statistics, over a few decades, have shown agriculture to be one of the most

hazardous industries in the U.S.

Every year there are numerous agricultural related injuries and fatalities. A serious injury or fatality in any farming community is enough to ruin a season and, in the worst case, change lives forever.

So, what do we do about it? High rates of injury and fatality is not a statistic to be proud of. Tragic life change lasts for many years and affects so many people. The negative impact of these difficult statistics are heavy and long lasting.

One answer to address agricultural hazards is awareness and education. These strategies have been used and proven over time to address many issues like drug and alcohol abuse, driving

safety programs, crop production, and many others.

In the 1990s, agriculture was rebuilding and growing in the early part of the decade. At that time, Kentucky's fatality and injury rates were 300 percent above the national average. Clearly something had to be done.

By the mid-1990s, two efforts, among others, were in place. One was an ag safety program started from the Kentucky Department of Agriculture. From this we now see the positive efforts and impact of Dale Dobson and the many programs, handshakes, and trainings he has conducted since then. Another effort was an agriculture safety class at Murray State University started by Dr. Dwayne Driskill. Like Dale, Dr. Driskill had a long career of similar impacts. To date, the ag safety class has taught more than 1,500 college students about a variety of agriculture safety topics. Many of these students go on to have careers in production agriculture,

some become agriculture teachers, and others have careers in safety. In addition, members of the ag safety class have taught an average of 400 children each year through local involvement with an agriculture day, organized by the Calloway County Conservation District office. The class has also been involved with Willie B's Adventures, a children's focused story, that we are excited to see take shape. The point – the positive impact and influence of learning and being aware is immeasurable.

An education is something that can never be taken away from someone. If something seemingly small is learned that could save a life or have a positive impact someday, I feel that is more than worth the effort. We can never predict or measure the future impact of worthwhile education. But the value is priceless, especially when that impact is a safe and protected agriculture community.



# Ky. Farmers: *Please Join Us!*

MURRAY, Ky. – Commissioner of Agriculture Jonathan Shell will honor Kentucky’s farmers and the work they do at a Farmers’ Appreciation and Awards Day on Wednesday, Sept. 17, 2025, at the Murray State University William “Bill” Cherry Agricultural Exposition Center.

“Kentucky’s farm families are the backbone of our communities and our economy. Farmers’ Appreciation Day is about more than recognition – it’s about giving back to the people who give us so much,” Commissioner Shell said. “From farm safety to mental health, this event honors their hard work, raises awareness, and ensures every farmer knows they are seen, valued, and supported.”

The event leads up to National Farm Safety and Health Week, designated this year for the week of Sept. 21-27, 2025.

Dale Dobson, director of the Division of Farm Safety and Rural Health at the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, said this event is an important reminder to Kentucky farmers to put their health and safety first.

“Farmers’ Appreciation Day is more than a celebration – it’s a reminder that the safety, health, and well-being of our farm families is just as important as the hard work they do every day. Behind every harvest is a farmer who deserves to come home safe,” Dobson said.

The Farmers’ Appreciation and Awards Day is hosted by Raising Hope — a program of KDA’s Division of Farm Safety and Rural Health. The first 700 people to arrive will receive free T-shirts sponsored by Farm Credit Services. There will be a free meal, including hamburgers and ice cream.

The day will offer free health screenings, educational safety, health, and rescue booths, an agricultural career fair, and lots of free items, including first aid kits. There will also be an awards ceremony to recognize several farmers and other individuals who have been part of farm safety initiatives and practices, and have supported the efforts of Raising Hope.

Everyone is invited.



The 2024 Farmers’ Appreciation Day at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green was a huge success. This year the special event to celebrate Kentucky farmers and their families will be held at Murray State University. Everyone is invited!

## Farmers’ Appreciation Day

Murray State University

William “Bill” Cherry Agricultural Exposition

Center, College Farm Road, Murray, Ky.

Wednesday, September 17, 2025

10 a.m. – 1 p.m. CST

Free Registration, Food, Health Screenings, And T-Shirts.

Booths will be available with information and giveaways.



## Reach Out. Get Help. You Matter!



## Help is just a phone call away

Appalachian Regional Healthcare (ARH) has launched the Farmer Care Initiative to support Kentucky’s agriculture industry.

The Farmer Care Call Line is staffed 24/7 and ready to help anyone – farmers, producers, growers and employees – in mental distress or just needing someone. It’s easy to use! Just dial 606-487-6160.

The local number will be answered by an ARH medical professional with resources across the Commonwealth.

Other Farmer Care Initiative components include Extension Office community health education and screening events, Farmers’ Market partnership activities and supporting Kentucky Department of Agriculture’s Raising Hope events.

ARH leads Kentucky’s Food Is Medicine programs and believes that caring for the people who fuel the food systems is critical to building resilient communities and prosperity across the Commonwealth.

**Appalachian Regional Healthcare’s Farmers’ Resource Line  
Is Available 24/7 for all Kentucky Farmers: 606-487-6160**

### Did you know?

The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline is a national hotline but includes 14 Kentucky call centers. Connection to additional crisis services will be provided if necessary.

The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in the United States.

# 988

## SUICIDE & CRISIS LIFELINE

Raising Hope is a project funded by the Kentucky General Assembly through the Kentucky Department of Agriculture. Special thank you to our legislators for their support of Kentucky farmers. And, special thank you to Commissioner of Agriculture Jonathan Shell for his support of this program and commitment to providing Kentucky farmers with resources to help them enjoy safe, healthy lives. *Learn more at [kyagr.com/raisinghope](https://kyagr.com/raisinghope)*

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