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**Farm planned for autistic adults**

By [Lawrence Budd](http://www.daytondailynews.com/staff/lawrence-budd/)

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A West Carrollton woman is heading a $3 million-$4 million fundraising effort aimed at opening Ohio’s third agricultural community for adults with autism.

Nancy Bernotaitis heads Good Works Farm, a new non-profit that is planning to establish a working farm for autistic adults in southwest Ohio.

“We’re going to be fundraising for the next four years,” said Bernotaitis, former president of the Dayton chapter of the Autism Society of America.

Existing Ohio adult residential programs, at Safe Haven Farm near Middletown and Bittersweet Farms in the Toledo area, have waiting lists.

Meanwhile the prevalence of children diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder has grown by about 25 percent since 2000, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

Already an estimated 1.5 million Americans have been diagnosed with autism — including more than 5,500 children in Ohio — making it the fastest-growing developmental disability, according to experts.

“As the growing number of children with autism become teenagers and adults, we have to be looking at new and creative ways to deliver services,” said Don Oda II, a board member at Safe Haven Farm and a common pleas judge in Warren County. “I am hopeful that we will see these farms springing up all across the country.”

Medicaid officials favor group homes and community services in urban settings over large, rural residential programs, advocates said.

“They want you to have a very small footprint,” said Vicki Obee, executive director at Bittersweet Farms, in the Toledo area.

Opened in 1983, Bittersweet Farms was the first of fewer than 10 residential farms in the U.S. serving people with autism, according to experts.

Bittersweet offers 20 residences and a range of programs, including various jobs needed in management of a community garden and production of products, including pesto sauce and cookies, at three locations around Toledo and Lima.

Bittersweet also trains parents, including those who opened Safe Haven and Bernotaitis.

“We talk to a lot of families, from all around the world really,” Obee said.

Opened in 2010, Safe Haven Farm offers 16 residences for autistic adults, as well as day programs for adults. In coming years, the non-profit hopes to offer horseback riding and training for parents at the center in Madison Twp., outside Middletown.

“We’re working with people from around the country,” said Dennis Rogers, president of South Haven.

Hiram Farms, outside Cleveland, offers day programs, but no residential services.

**Good Works Farm**

Bernotaitis became interested in alternatives after realizing the lack of options for her 15-year-old son, Sam, when he became an adult.

She favored settings like those at Safe Haven and Bittersweet, but was discouraged by long waiting lists.

Within five years, Good Works Farm hopes to offer 20 residences and day programs for autistic adults, and summer camps for autistic children — somewhere in rural southwestern Ohio.

“We don’t have any land right now,” she said. The group also is awaiting approval of non-profit status from the Internal Revenue Service.

Next week, a casino fund-raiser is planned at the American Legion in Dayton. So far, no major donors have come forward.

“God just keeps putting the right people in my path,” she said.