

**February 28, 2008**

**Human Services Committee Public Hearing**

**Testimony of –**

**Brian S. Sigman  
Executive Director  
Board of Education and Services for the Blind**

**RE:**

**Raised Bill 418**

**AAC the Hiring of Support Staff for Teachers of the Blind and Visually Impaired**

**Good Morning, Senator Harris, Representative Villano, Senator Kissel, Representative Gibbons and distinguished members of the Human Services Committee. My name is Brian Sigman. I am the Executive Director of BESB - the Board of Education and Services for the Blind. I am here today to testify in favor of Raised Bill 418 – An Act Concerning the Hiring of Support Staff for Teachers of the Blind and Visually Impaired. I also want to especially thank the Committee for raising this important bill.**

**If passed, this bill will enable BESB to hire much needed support personnel to help our professional staff spend more time with the children they are meant to serve. And this would be accomplished with no impact on the General Fund in this or any subsequent fiscal year.**

**With the passage of Public Act 03-219, the Legislature and the Governor generously allowed BESB to utilize the**

**“Educational Aid for Blind and Visually Handicapped Children Account” for the hiring of Teachers of the Visually Impaired (or TVI’s). These teachers provide Braille literacy instruction, adjustment to blindness services and technical consultations to school professionals and paraprofessionals on techniques for maximizing the education of children who are blind or visually impaired. I am pleased to report that since the passage of this law, BESB’s compliment of TVI’s has grown from 19 staff to the current level of 31. With ongoing recruitment efforts, the agency is well on the way to achieving a full staffing level of 40 teachers to meet statutory caseload size requirements.**

**With the passage of Public Act 05-156, the agency was granted the additional authority to utilize the “Educational Aid for Blind and Visually Handicapped Children Account” to add Rehabilitation Teachers, Orientation and Mobility Instructors, and Rehabilitation Technologists to the Children’s program. This was a new, and much needed addition to the direct service options offered by the agency. These professional staff provide direct instruction in the expanded core curriculum, teaching independent living skills, safe travel techniques, and access to adaptive technology devices. To date, the agency has added three (3) Orientation and Mobility Instructors, one (1) Rehabilitation Teacher and one (1) Rehabilitation Technologist. Recruitment efforts continue to add additional staff in each of these categories.**

**All of these professional staff play a vital role, increasing the independence of children who are blind or visually impaired. The Legislature’s directive – your directive – to place more frontline staff face-to-face with these children has been a success. Children are being served, more often, with more**

highly trained professionals dedicated to improving the lives of these young people.

We now need your help in allowing the agency to use the “Educational Aid for Blind and Visually Handicapped Children Account” to hire clerical support and Special Assistants to the Blind. To illustrate this critical need, at the time when the agency had only 19 professional staff serving children, there were two clerical support staff and no Special Assistants to the Blind for the Children’s Program. At this time, with the professional staffing level now at 36, the clerical support is only 3 staff, and there are 2 Special Assistants to the Blind. The increased staffing level has been accomplished by converting existing General Funded positions to meet these needs. However, by utilizing the General Fund positions for this purpose, other critical needs within the agency, such as direct service staff to work with senior citizens who are blind, have gone unfilled. The agency is now at a point that if an additional field staff person who is blind were to be hired in Children’s Services, there would not be a General Funded position available for providing a Special Assistant to the Blind.

Raised bill 418 would permit the agency to solve this concern by drawing up to 5 percent of the \$7.1 million appropriation in the “Educational Aid for Blind and Visually Handicapped Children Account” to use for these essential support staff. While 5 percent would represent only \$355,000 of the overall appropriation, the benefit would be far reaching, resulting in up to 6 new support staff as needed, to meet current and future program growth. The remaining \$6,745,000 in the account would still be ample to cover all of the other direct service, purchased services and reimbursement provisions of existing statute.

**Again, on behalf of all of Connecticut's children with blindness or visual impairment, BESB thanks the Human Services Committee and the entire General Assembly for your forward thinking in this area. With this extra bit of help, you can make sure that our vital direct service staffing resources will be focused fully on the children we are all here to serve.**

**Thank you again for your time and attention. I am happy to answer any questions the Committee may have.**