

**Rev. Salvatore F. Cavagnuolo**

*Our Lady of Fatima*

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Good evening. My name is Father Salvatore Cavagnuolo, and I am the Pastor of Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Church in Wallingford, CT. I'm here this evening to voice my surprise and disappointment at the proposed dilution of what I see as one of the most effective social programs run by the State of Connecticut!

19 years ago I met a parishioner, Christine Ford, who was a client of BESB, and through her I became aware of and was much impressed with the unbelievably wonderful support offered by BESB. Many of our citizens suffer from debilitating handicaps, but NONE more than the blind. They hold a unique position in the hierarchy of dependency.

To mention only one of the many problems that impact their life, the mere fact that they cannot drive a car impinges upon absolutely everything they do or wish to attempt. A deaf person can drive to work. A person with no legs can drive a vehicle with hand controls, an elderly person can take a bus or a cab and shop, but a blind person can do none of these things on his own. Even using a public restroom labeled "handicapped" is fraught with dangers and lunacies. For example: how does a blind person know where to feel for the Braille sign! And where IS the toilet or the sink or the soap or the hand towels or the trash located, once the maze of doors is navigated? And watch out for that handrail when you bend over! There isn't a single, so-called "Handicapped Restroom" in existence that a blind person can use without assistance!

And let's not even go into the discriminatory attitudes of ignorant people. I have personally witnessed on three occasions, Christine being asked to leave a restaurant because she has a guide dog, even though it's against the law to refuse her. On two occasions, the Police sided with the restaurant owner!

Dealing with the handicap is bad enough, but to have to deal with the prejudice is demeaning and depressing. Enter BESB. Because of their wonderful programs, Christine was able to go back to school and train for a profession. The technology she was introduced to enabled her to start her own business. BESB gave her all that including dignity. She became a productive citizen and has paid back more to the State than the State ever spent on her. You can't say that about most other programs.

Christine has two brothers and a sister who are also blind, living in three other states. None of them come close to functioning as well as Christine because none of those

states has a program that can compare with ours. The axiom "If it ain't broke don't fix it" comes to mind.

To look at BESB as just another program that deals with the handicapped is to minimize the expertise of the people who work there. No other agency comes close to recognizing the need and seeing the solution. And the solution does not consist of just throwing money at a problem! These people care about their clients. If there is a problem with funding, cut back expenses or salaries or whatever and wherever you have to, but don't eliminate the program as if it's less important than some others. And if you combine this agency with any other, that's the same thing as eliminating it. You do a disservice to the neediest segment of our population, and by extension, you demean yourselves. I respectfully beg that you reconsider.