

**Testimony of: Brenda J. Sullivan
Parent of a child who is blind**

**In Opposition of: Governor's Bill 1012
March 4, 2011**

Honorable Chairmen and Members of the Appropriation Committee:

My name is Brenda Sullivan, I am here on behalf of my 14 year old daughter who has been a client of BESB since she was 3 months old. In addition, in the spirit of full disclosure, for the last 4 years, I have been an appointed member of the BESB State Rehabilitation Council, serving as Vice-Chair in 2009 as well as the Chair of the BESB Satisfaction Survey Committee for 2 years. For the last 10 years, I have also been an appointed member of the CT State Advisory Council on Special Education (SAC), serving as Chair from 2008 – 2011 and currently I serve as Chair of the Legislative Sub-Committee and as a member of the Executive Council.

I am here in opposition of the Governor's Bill 1012 which proposes to close the Board of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB), moving the children's services to the Department of Education and the adult rehabilitation services to the Department of Social Services.

By eliminating the only agency dedicated to serving the blind and deaf blind this will force the most vulnerable population to compete with other services and funding within these agencies. The staff at BESB is well trained, well educated and has an expertise on all issues of blindness that I have not seen in any other state agency, school district or private/nonprofit organization. In addition, BESB's funding is totally dedicated to serving the needs of all individual's who are blind and not those who qualify under a strict set of pre-determined criteria.

What realistic hope is there that any funding ear-marked for the blind will ever actually be used for that purpose? Most likely, it will siphoned off. Then what? Who will help my daughter who is *entitled* to specialized services because she is blind?

My daughter, who had a stroke before she was born, is missing 50%+ of her brain and, as a result, she is cortically visually blind. She has some vision but not enough to enable normal function and communication. Images are severely distorted and there are large holes in her field of vision. When she is sick or overwhelmed, she stops using her eyes and relies on her hearing to figure out what is going on around her. I would have never known this important fact if it wasn't for a BESB consultant who specialized in cortical visual impairments. This is critical information when teaching a child like my daughter.

Today, because my daughter is medically fragile she requires to be home schooled and we receive limited support from our school district. My fear is if BESB is closed and the children's services are moved to the Department of Education our district will not provide the level of services my daughter has been receiving these past 14 years. This will be a devastating consequence for a child who is considered unable to learn by many professionals.

In addition, with the current economic crisis, no district will hire a “consultant for the blind” if they have only 1 or 2 blind children as it would not be cost effective. As this is already the reality for many students who require other specialized related services, it certainly won’t be any different for children who are blind and/or deaf blind.

How many parents have heard the statement “there’s no funding or personnel to work with their child”? Yes, a statement like this is inflammatory and illegal but it’s the truth. Districts are struggling just like the rest of us. Today’s reality is that if a district enacts a hiring freeze or receives no replies to a job posting, children are not going to get services.

Regarding the transfer of Voc-Rehab services to DSS, this puts adults (most of them newly blind) back in line in what is known as “order of selection” with DSS’s Bureau of Rehab Services (BRS). Are you aware that BRS has been operating under the designation of “order of selection” for many years?

For those who don’t know what this means – in a nutshell, there is not enough money to provide services to all individuals with a disability. In essence, they have a pre-determined set of qualifications and only provide services to those who fit that criteria. The rest are turned away. It is a fantasy to think that all adults who are blind will receive services from BRS. On the other hand, BESB does not operate under “order of selection” – there is currently enough funding to go around and anyone who needs services will get them.

In addition, the BESB Voc-Rehab division means the following:

- Jobs. The counselors help young people acquire the tools they need to be ready to realize their potential as productive members of the modern workforce.
- Ageless. The VR department helps legally blind people of all ages retain employment when they need support.
- Assists Employers retain good employees. The VR department provides support in the form of accommodations or education to employers about how they can keep a productive employee.

If VR becomes a small unit within the Bureau of Rehab Services, it will be starved of resources and attention in an already overworked understaffed and under funded agency. In addition, the state of CT will lose the dedicated leadership of Brian Sigman and his extremely talented and educated staff.

Please do not balance the budget on the backs of the most vulnerable population, individuals with disabilities. Do not support this bill. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony today.