

Dear Members of the Appropriations Committee:

I am writing as a taxpayer, a voter and an educator to strongly oppose the division of BESB, as proposed in HB #6380.

As a teacher of children with visual impairments, I have taught in a variety of settings and have worked for individual towns, collaboratives and state agencies. I am lucky enough to have spent most of my 25 year teaching career associated in one way or another with BESB. Over the years it has become abundantly clear that BESB provides a continuum of services unequalled in other models in terms of efficiency, ease of use and quality of services.

As a young teacher in Virginia, I watched a child in a nearby town go without services for nearly a year after the town's TVI (teacher of the visually impaired) moved away. Although a state agency for the blind existed, they provided minimal direct service and the child lost nearly a year of Braille instruction.

A friend, who is a TVI in New York, struggles daily to provide technology and mobility training to her students - with no access to a technologist or mobility instructor. She has called me many times to ask what training our students can access and to try to get help for her own clients.

Here in Connecticut, no eligible child is ever denied services. Our model provides teachers who can travel to many towns, which keeps the individual towns from being placed in the position of having to hire a TVI for a population that may include 2-3 children one year, none the following year, and 5-6 the next. All of our students can access mobility training, a technology specialist, and a wide variety of expanded core curriculum programming, if needed. In-service training is provided for classroom teachers, specialists and families. As our students approach high school graduation, vocational counselors (who would be moved to another agency by this bill) work closely with the TVIs, students, schools and families to plan for the student's post-graduate pursuits. Families, students and adults with visual impairments all know where to go to access services and support. BESB provides seamless cooperation and collaboration across disciplines to ensure the most independent and productive lives for our clients who are blind. A key to the great success of BESB programs has been having supervisors at all levels who have worked directly with people with visual impairments and understand the special challenges and needs of our clients, as well as the overarching goal of independence and productivity. Our service model is the envy of many states.

In these difficult financial times, it is important to look for cost-savings for taxpayers. I'm sure that the concept of dividing BESB into two parts at two different large agencies was well-intentioned as a tax-savings vehicle. The immediate cost-savings, however, are minimal to none - and the long-term costs of this move would be significant. Just duplicating the technology now shared by all agency employees to both new locations would likely eclipse any initial savings.

It is important, however, that we all recognize the need for savings - and BESB has proven again and again to be up to the task. When faced with a 22% budget reduction over two years, we found ways to continue to provide uninterrupted quality services in spite of these cuts. When the governor asked us to reduce our travel costs (actual mileage) by 10% - we found a way to meet this goal- and still continued to provide exemplary service to our clients. If we need to find more savings, we will find a way. If there is a dollar amount that will keep all parts of this agency together in one location, please consider asking us to find the savings before disbanding an agency with a 118 year history of highly respected quality services to people who are blind.

Thank you.

Lisa W. Pruner