Appropriations Committee Hearing on HB #6380
Friday, March 4, 2011

My name is Cheryl Brown and I live in Guilford, CT.

Chairs and Members of the Appropriations committee, thank you for allowing me to speak to you about HB 6380 recommending the elimination and division of BESB.

I am a 31 year employee of BESB. As a teacher of students with visual impairments, I have a long history with this agency. There are many reasons why I cannot support HB #6380 which abolishes the agency and sends the education portion to the State Department of Education while the remainder of the agency goes to the Department of Social Services. This bill will not save the state any money, it will negatively impact services to clients and the long term likelihood will leave services to clients in jeopardy. I hope that by sharing my concerns you will better understand the consequences. Let me explain.

Throughout my tenure with BESB, I have been part of 3 similar attempts to dismantle or dissect BESB. Legislatures before have looked into this. Each time this issue has come before the state, it has been determined to be a bad idea. I ask you to look at the past and realize that this issue has been considered and rejected for many reasons. Please put this idea to rest for good.

On paper, it looks like BESB will simply be divided and the parts assimilated into other agencies. The proposed cost savings is that of 4 personnel at the administrative level. Due to supportive federal dollars, this comes to about a $288.000 savings. In fact, there will be no cost savings; it will cost the state more. Let me explain why.

By splitting the agency into two parts, you will have to divide up its resources, resulting in the need to duplicate services, equipment and personnel. Right now the agency shares a braille unit which produces braille for adults and children; it shares a professional library, specialized equipment and material for the blind, a low vision center, and an assistive technology lab. In addition, special assistants and braillists do work for multiple divisions. The cost of reproducing these services is huge. For example, just the cost alone for a new braille embosser that is currently used by the agency is $50,000. This is just one of multiple expenses. The Low vision center is filled with Closed Circuit TVs and adaptive equipment. One CCTV can run $3000 while specialized software costs around $1000. Braille note takers cost approximately $6000. To set up both locations with this equipment and hire the personnel to support it will cost far more than what is projected to be saved.

In addition, by splitting the agency it results in reduced programing for our clients. This agency is well known for its ability to work together between divisions to create high quality programs for clients, parents, teachers, paraprofessionals and other district personnel. Programs include: parent, vocational, technology, student skills of daily living, sports programs, weekend programs, summer programs, transition programs,

teacher in-services, OT, PT and PE teacher in-services, paraprofessional in-services, CEU trainings, deafblind and multiple disability training as well as others. We have housed numerous training programs within our facility-with the new model we will not only lose expertise for these events, we will lose the training facilities as well.

Putting the teachers under SDE can only be a short term plan, leaving an uncertain future for services to the children we serve. This is an agency that does not provide direct services. The staff there has limited knowledge or expertise in the education of children who are blind. In fact it is in conflict with what they do-that of evaluating and monitoring educational programs. They are not prepared to implement the kind of programing our clients need. It is a conflict of interest. The last time this was proposed, the SDE came out and said they would simply give the money to towns and do away with state services- a likely scenario again. Currently there is only a temporary commissioner of the SDE; no one even knows who will be running the Department. The implications of this are frightening to our families and will cost the towns much more in the long run. Although the intent might not be to impact services, the result certainly will.

Another concern that arises with this consolidation is one of space. Will the SDE have storage for the Braille and large print library currently housing 60,000 volumes? How about space for volunteer braillists? We also need to think about the 43 current Children's Services staff, the facilities for student programs (use of kitchen facility for teaching ADL) and the facilities for in-service training for district personnel. In addition, consideration of storage of specialized materials for loan to students as well as space for the professional library must be found.

With this consolidation, Children Services would lose their purchasing function as it would go to DSS, putting a strain on the SDE's staff. The SDE will be responsible for managing a group of highly trained teachers despite their lack of managerial knowledge or expertise in blindness-the SDE staff have little or no knowledge or understanding of the Expanded Core Curriculum for the blind mandated by IDEA. Also lost will be the consolidated client data. There will also be a cost of integrating Children Services database with SDE.

BESB is a centralized center where constituents can receive all services from birth to death. With such a low incidence population, this is the most cost effective model. Asking towns to take this over when they might have but one student this year and 4 the next is unmanageable and cost ineffective. Because it is a low-incidence disability, blindness cannot be administered in the same way that other disabilities are. The costs to educate a child with blindness are huge. The needs of our clients are unique and by having centralized services we are able to provide for them in a cost effective service delivery model that works. No cost savings or program improvement would result from the proposed changes.

I have personally seen the successes this agency has facilitated. Just this past December, a student who was born premature and without any vision, graduated with a

law degree. She received agency support from children services, adult services and vocational rehabilitation. Due to this coordinated programing she can now become an independent, self-supporting tax payer.

A constituent who has a family member who is losing vision, a parent who has a baby born blind, a district with a newly diagnosed child, or an individual who has a visual impairment can simply pick up the phone and make one call to talk to many service delivery persons. Once divided and incorporated into a larger agency the process of obtaining services and connecting with the correct person will become cumbersome. Reaching the head of the agency will no longer be a simple task, layers of bureaucracy will stand in the way, and once located, that person will know little about the needs of a person with blindness.

In my 31 years, I have witnessed BESB become more financially efficient, more accountable and more highly responsive to their clients' needs. Keeping all parts of this agency together is the only logical choice you can make to meet the needs of your blind constituents.

Thank you for attention to this matter. Please vote against HB #6380
Sincerely,

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