

March 3, 2011

Senator Harp, Representative Walker and Members of the Appropriation Committee:

I am a Teacher of the Visually Impaired employed by the Board of Education and Services for the Blind. In this role I serve students who are blind and visually impaired and teach skills mandated by the Individuals with Disability Act. These skills include Braille, adaptive technologies specific to blindness, skills of daily living and vocational rehabilitation skills. Since blindness is considered a low incidence disability, the manners in which these services are delivered vary greatly from other disabilities.

The current proposal to divide BESB into the State Department of Education and the Department of Social Services will create a situation in which redundancies will have to be created among these two separate state agencies in order to serve clients who are blind and visually impaired. Equipment and materials will have to be split and/or recreated for clients who are served under each of these agencies.

I believe the separation of BESB will ultimately result in a significant reduction of programming for blind and visually impaired clients. In addition to the direct services I provide to clients I also serve as the co-chair of the Professional Development Committee, Summer Programs Committee and Low Vision Training Committee at BESB. Within each of these roles I see the manner in which the divisions at BESB work together to develop and implement comprehensive programs for our clients. Without the ability to work with professionals from other divisions, the quality of the programs we offer will eventually suffer.

Serving on the Professional Development Committee I help to plan professional education opportunities to teachers of the visually impaired, as well as general and special education teachers from around the state. Additionally, these trainings are open to other professionals at BESB. Splitting the agency would result in decreased opportunities for such professional development and thus create a situation in which teachers and related professionals have fewer opportunities to develop their skills and meet the needs of their clients.

Within the Summer Programs Committee I help to create and implement summer education opportunities for students who are blind and visually impaired. These programs concentrate on developing the skills students will need in order to be successful, independent and employed adults. Members of this committee include individuals who work in the Vocational Rehabilitation Division of BESB. The input of these individuals is essential in planning successful programs that will meet the needs of older students. The planning that occurs takes into account the current and future vocational rehabilitation needs of our clients. I believe that dividing BESB will be harmful to the programs that are offered and can ultimately decrease the ability for successful transitions to life beyond high school for these students.

Finally, in my role on the Low Vision Training Committee I am responsible for helping to plan an agency wide initiative to provide technology training opportunities to all BESB clients and related service providers such as low vision doctors. This committee is in the process of developing a technology fair that will allow clients and related service providers to come to BESB to examine and be trained on the newest adaptive technologies available. Such trainings provide a highly efficient and centralized model for providing educational opportunities to all of our clients. A centralized model allows us to provide such trainings without the need for further expenditures such as the use of outside facilities or the need to hire

outside individuals to provide instruction. This committee is composed of members from the Children Services, Adult Services and Vocational Rehabilitation divisions at BESB. With the input of all of these professionals, we were able to develop a cost effective model to provide such educational opportunities to clients. Splitting BESB among agencies would eliminate such opportunities for clients of all ages to come to a central location to receive such services.

In summation, the interaction between divisions is essential in providing comprehensive services to all of our clients. Splitting BESB into two separate agencies will decrease the ability for professionals to work together to meet the varying needs of individuals who are blind and visually impaired. This will ultimately result in a degradation of services to these individuals and in the end be more costly to the state from a fiscal standpoint.

Sincerely,

Michael Pompano