

Dear Honorable Senators/Representatives:

Vote no on HB-967, An Act Consolidating Various State Agencies in Governor Malloy's proposed budget. More specifically, the proposal to divide the Board of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) and merge it into two separate agencies; namely, the Department of Education (DOE) and the Department of Social Services (DSS).

You may think legal blindness will never touch your life. However, imagine this:

- Your mother or grandmother is a widow and she develops age-related macular degeneration. She is forced to give up driving, she cannot read her daily mail nor write checks to pay the bills and she can no longer see her TV screen to watch her favorite programs.
- Your business colleague is a victim of a violent crime. He is an innocent bystander and receives a gunshot wound to his head. Fortunately, he is alive but he wakes up from a coma and finds he has lost all functional vision and is now blind. How will he be able to return to your law practice?
- Your neighbors are excitedly expecting a baby girl. However, the mother goes into premature labor and gives birth to their child eight weeks early. The baby's prognosis is touch and go but ultimately the proud parents come home with their child. Unfortunately, the baby's eyes are damaged and she will require specialized intervention and training to grow up and lead a normal life.
- Your teenage son is diagnosed with a brain tumor. The tumor is surgically removed successfully but his optic nerve is damaged. Now, he will never get his drivers license or be able to play on his high school football team. You wonder; can he go to college, find a job, and have a fulfilling life with a wife and children?

Or, maybe it will be you. Like me, I have diabetes and I never thought I would lose my vision. However, because of BESB and their invaluable services, I have been able to build a rewarding and productive life for myself after blindness.

BESB offers itinerant services which DSS does not whether it be in the home, school or work. Nor does DOE provide direct services to children and families; both of which are the cornerstone of BESB's service delivery.

The staff of BESB has received specialized training in working with people with this low incidence disability. Social Workers, Education Consultants serving children, Orientation and Mobility Instructors, Rehabilitation Teachers, vocational counselors and Adaptive Technology Specialists all work collaboratively to enable BESB's clients to become well educated, self-supporting and fully integrated members of their communities. These outcomes will significantly diminish if BESB is split up and merged into larger umbrella agencies. The professional staff at these larger mega-agencies have a general disabilities background and lack the expertise needed by people who are legally blind.

It is unlikely that by dismantling BESB and absorbing their functions into other larger entities that there will be a significant cost savings to the state of Connecticut. BESB has a small management structure and services are provided in-house rather than through outside contracted vendors. Additionally, specialized tools and equipment purchased for BESB clients are purchased in bulk at a significantly reduced cost. These savings would not be realized by eliminating the separate agency for the blind in Connecticut.

How do I know this? After rebuilding my life after vision loss and finding employment in the insurance industry, I returned to college and obtained a Masters in Special Education of the Blind. I am now a proud employee of BESB and know how what a significant impact we make on the lives of people who are blind in our state.

Sincerely,

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