

## **NATIONAL FEDERATION OF THE BLIND OF CONNECTICUT**

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**Elizabeth Rival, President**

Dear Governor Malloy and Members of the Appropriations Committee;

I am writing on behalf of the National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut. I am currently the Affiliate President. I am writing to urge that the Board of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) not be combined or merged with the Departments of Education and Social Services. This consolidation is presently before the State Legislature as HB6380, as well as SB 387 and SB 1012.

Since the late 1800's, BESB has been providing services to the blind of Connecticut based upon our unique needs, and continues to do so today due in great part to the present leadership of it's current Executive Director, Brian Sigman. In these days of budgetary limitations, Mr. Sigman has run this agency with effectiveness and compassion, while staying within his given budget.

The blind community listened intently during your campaign for Governor, when you spoke of educational opportunities for the citizens of Connecticut, and we assumed you meant all the citizenry. By combining the aforementioned agencies, I feel the strides we have made in the past few years will be severely put at risk.

Being blind has unique needs that require the talents of teachers of the blind; these include mobility training and Braille. Instructors who deal with other disability issues cannot meet these needs and more. Today, BESB operates efficiently and reports to a Board comprised with learned individuals who represent a broad spectrum of the blind community. I would hate to imagine how much we would be lose in a combined agency as is currently proposed. I am especially concerned for the blind children of our State who will suffer if this legislation is moved forward.

As elected President of the National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut, I respectfully urge that these agencies not be combined as it would be a detriment to all the blind people of Connecticut and to the strides made by BESB in recent years.

Respectfully submitted;

Elizabeth Rival

President,

National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut

To the Chairman and all other members of the Appropriations Committee:

I am writing in opposition to House Bill #6380. Under this bill, the Board of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) would be discontinued as a separate state agency and its functions divided between the Department of Social Service (DSS) and the Department of Education (DE). For the purposes of full disclosure, I have been a client of BESB for more than 40 years, and I also have been an employee of BESB for the past four years.

BESB is a direct service agency with all four divisions working together to coordinate and deliver the highest level of services to blind and visually impaired children and adults throughout the state. The Children's Services division provides direct services to families and children for children age's birth to 3, and preschool children 3 to 5. It also provides direct educational services in the classroom and home environments for children from kindergarten through 12th grade, as well as services to facilitate a smooth and productive transition to programs beyond high school such as higher education and employment. The teachers and staff of the Children's Services division not only serve children who are primarily blind or visually impaired, but also children who are blind with other significant impairments as well as children who are deaf-blind.

If BESB were to be absorbed by the Department of Education, as is proposed in this bill, this model of direct service that has been so successful for many years will likely be discontinued following the reorganization. The mission, history, and practice of the Department of Education do not provide direct services and thus there is no experience with such a direct service delivery model in the department of education. In the past when such agency consolidations have been proposed the Department of Education has indicated there desire to discontinue direct services and reallocate funding for such services back to individual school districts for their use.

Because blindness and low vision is a low incidence disability it is possible for a school district to have a blind or visually impaired student in class one year and not have any students who qualify for service over the next several years. This circumstance means that it is extremely inefficient for a school district to provide services for students when it is uncertain year-to-year how many students they will be required, by state and federal law, to provide for and for how long. A much more cost-efficient model is used by the Children's Services division of BESB in which the educational staff serves the entire state and caseloads remain high because the division has the flexibility of shifting resources and staff as needed according to each school districts needs for each academic year. Therefore staff has the flexibility to serve multiple districts and move between districts according to the changing needs of student demographics and student needs. This is a much more efficient model as it allows for the complete coverage of the State as the individual needs of each school district changes according to their enrollment of blind and visually impaired students.

In **addition**, because the Children's Services division is one department within a larger agency it is easy to share information through a common database, of clients as they transition from one division to another, as well as to share specialized resources such as library resources, adaptive technology resources, used for student evaluation testing and training for all divisions, IT resources and purchasing and administrator resources. The coordination of services from birth to death in one agency also provides clients with the opportunity of knowing who and where to call if they have difficulty at any point in their life experience. This kind of long-term oversight of clients provides for a coherent coordination of services as client's transition from one division to another, for example Children's Services for educational support, to Vocational Rehabilitation for support in college and or employment, and Adult Services for in-home support later in life.

A good example of a direct service that begins with Children's Services that is integrated and continued with support from other divisions is adaptive technology services. In Children's Services, the adaptive technology specialist works with the education consultants to evaluate, recommend and train students to use the best available adaptive technology to help him or her succeed in the classroom. Of course, this process requires a direct service model in which all aspects of the student's visual function, educational needs, and physical and mental abilities are evaluated, but it also involves coordinating services among other adaptive technology specialists when clients move from high school to college or high school to work. The resources available at the agency for students to try out various adaptive technology options are shared among divisions and this collaborative effort would be lost if the agency were to be divided into two separate groups. There are many other examples of this type of collaborative effort including daily living skills development between Children's Services and Vocation Rehabilitation services, Orientation and Mobility services as well as job preparation and transition to the workplace for students in high school who are preparing for college or employment.

Finally, the citizens of Connecticut are best served by having BESB remain as a separate agency. The model of service used has proven to be successful and would be less so if the agency were to be broken up. The cost savings for such a reorganization are minimal and the potential for harm to the clients currently served by BESB is great, and is not in the best interests of the citizens of Connecticut.

Thank you,

Dennis J. Gallant