

Senator Toni Harp Co-Chairperson Appropriations Committee
Representative Toni Walker Co-Chairperson Appropriations
Committee

Re: Senate Bill 1012

Senate Bill 1012 proposes dissolution of The Board of Education and Services for the Blind and moves its' services to the Department of Education and Department of Social Services.

I oppose this bill. BESB should remain as a stand-alone Agency. Moving its responsibilities to any department is not acceptable.

In 1893 Emily Wells Foster had the vision to know that the blind needed a dedicated agency that understood and could meet their special needs. The result of her hard work was the establishment of Oak Hill School for the Blind now Ct Institute for the Blind/ Oak Hill and BESB. Both of these agencies have continued to serve the blind and visually handicapped in CT from birth to death for more than one hundred years! They are the models of service and support for the individuals with visual and other disabilities; the training manual that organizations throughout the entire world look up to. Years ago, I recall Superintendent Lars Guldager calling to ask if we had room in our home for an overnight visitor. It seems that a young businessman from Argentina with a deaf-blind daughter was visiting programs in the United States in hopes of creating a new model in his home country. He visited Oak Hill and BESB in hopes of learning from the best. He brought this knowledge back to his native country.

Under the present Director, Brian Sigman, BESB continues its important work with distinction. The agency provides services to the blind, visually impaired and deaf-blind throughout their life time. One call to BESB sets you in the right direction. The

Agency has assembled in one location all the services and specialists one may need.

Who are these clients? It could be parents, whose young son has just been diagnosed with congenital cataracts and who would need a lifetime of special schooling and services. It could be a vision impaired worker who now needs adaptive devices to remain in the workplace or perhaps an aging parent with diminishing vision who needs training to stay active at home. With one call to BESB, all can be directed to the proper department. Governor Malloy has focused on jobs in CT. BESB has excelled in the area of job training for the visually impaired and many CT workers are employed today because of the help they received from BESB rehab specialists. The Governor also stated that the safety nets would remain in place. Well, BESB and its people are the safety net for the hundreds of clients it serves.

I have been associated with BESB for 34 years. As the parent of a deaf-blind adult son and as a volunteer, I have seen the Board conduct its' mission. I have also served on The State Vocational Rehabilitation Council for 6 years(2 years as chair) and for many years on the Advisory Committee for Deaf-Blind over 21 of which I am presently the chairperson.

When one's child, relative or oneself is diagnosed with a vision impairment he or she needs a readily identifiable agency to connect you with services. What folks knew was right for Connecticut over 100 years ago is even more important in today's technologically advanced world. Everyone needs that personal touch that says "I care about you and I can help you". BESB has survived through other fiscal crises and should continue to survive this one as a stand-alone agency.

The Department of Social Services and the Department of Education already are very large departments dealing with a great

number of clients. My fear is that the blind of CT will have a much more difficult time receiving services when they have to negotiate the bureaucracy of these larger agencies.

Let's not begin embarking on what will be a very slippery slope in services to the disabled.

Thank you for your attention.

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