

The Board of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) has been slated to be split between the Department of Social Services (DSS) and the Department of Education (DOE) as part of Governor Malloy's current budget.

It is our contention that the proposed division of BESB services would only save approximately \$500,000.00 in management salaries, while significantly impacting the state's ability to provide the unique services required by its blind and legally blind citizens.

The proposed merger of BESB's components with DSS and DOE would not provide the blind community with the same level of quality services that they have historically received beginning in 1893. The DOE does not currently have a direct services component and DSS does not typically provide itinerant services, both of which are essential to blind clients.

Blindness is considered to be a low incidence disability within the greater disability community. As such, it presents unique challenges and requires highly trained staff to identify and meet the needs of the clients served.

Currently, there are more than 11,000 individuals registered with BESB with some 3,000 – 3,500 actively receiving services in a given year. Approximately 10% have no usable vision, while the remaining 90% have various degrees of residual vision. These clients all require a wide variety of services and resources in order to maximize their potential. Clients are served by our Adult Services, Children's Services and Vocational Rehabilitation Services divisions.

It must be noted that Connecticut has an aging population and age-related macular degeneration is the leading cause of blindness in adults over the age of 55. BESB provides a seamless delivery of services to clients and their families from birth through old age.

BESB has its own social workers to handle client intakes as well as to help coordinate needed services from other agencies. These social workers also explain benefits and BESB services and often help newly diagnosed legally blind individuals adjust to their new challenges. Many BESB staff are legally blind and have themselves have benefited from services.

BESB provides services to clients in their own environment, whether at work, home or school. Mergers with DSS and DOE would likely reduce or eliminate this itinerate model. As noted earlier, BESB directly provides a wide range of services including:

- orientation and mobility, ensuring safe travel,
- rehabilitation teaching, including training in independent living skills and home management,
- job development, placement and retention,
- rehabilitation technology,
- braille instruction and provision of braille and large-print materials.

BESB also maintains a library of Braille and large-print books and materials. How would these materials be maintained in the event of mergers? It should be noted that BESB purchases such items as technological aids, low vision devices, etc. in bulk in order to

stretch revenues. This practice contributes to the quick delivery of necessary aids, but would be lost in the proposed merger.

BESB has a very lean management structure that allows its professional staff a great deal of autonomy to assess, provide and coordinate individualized client services. These individualized services would likely be sacrificed in a potential merger.

BESB has an active and viable Board of Directors comprised of both blind and sighted members. These members help shape the agency mission and actively identify issues and strategies to address them. This would be lost in the proposed merger.

The loss of BESB with its individualized itinerant services model would negatively impact provision of services for blind citizens. The impact cannot be overstated. This idea has been proposed and rejected twice before, and we strongly urge that this proposal is rejected once again.