

## Testimony Opposing SB-1012

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Good evening, my name is Michelle Laramie. I am a Rehabilitation Technologist for the Board of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) where I have worked in various capacities for 16 years. I will, however, be speaking to you today as a resident of the State of Connecticut who is legally blind. My testimony expresses opposition to SB-1012

Some of you will dismiss my testimony because of my position as a State employee. However, my opposition to inclusion of BESB services under other state agencies predates my employment with the State of Connecticut.

Before Governor Malloy released his budget, one of the statements that he made was that he had crafted a budget that would protect our most vulnerable citizens. Imagine my surprise when the budget figures for the BESB showed blindness services being delivered by a fractured BESB with services divided between 2 agencies with minimal knowledge of the needs of the community of people who are blind. After all no one has done it but BESB since 1893. Governor Malloy also said that reasonable people may disagree but we can come to the table to have discussions and reach solutions.

There are two painful ironies in his words for me as a person who is blind and who works in my community. While there are many out in the world educated working people who have received services from BESB that have led to employment, our community has its fair share of vulnerable members current and future who will be hurt by the fracturing of our service delivery system. To his point of coming to the table, it is very hard for people who are blind to get to the table when the time for public comments starts right about the time that public transportation becomes quite scarce. I know many people in our community could not be heard tonight because of it.

I have to say that I am deeply disappointed to be sitting before you for the third time since my own vision loss saying the same thing: no good can come from splitting BESB in two. And perhaps nothing speaks so loudly to the uniqueness of how services are delivered to citizens who are blind in our state than that no matter which political party is in control, no one can figure out how to merge us as a whole unit.

Which leads me to my final points: Blindness is a low incidence disability, which requires specialized services to address people's needs. Many of those services can be shared in a unified agency actually saving money and providing the highest degree of professional collaboration to serve the population. If there is a dollar amount that you hoped to save by splitting up BESB, figure out how to achieve it within the existing organization or move us as a whole.

And finally, that last time I gave testimony, I left the committee with my 3 "hopes" and I share those again with you tonight: I hope neither you nor someone you love will be among the 15% who will require BESB services. I never thought I would become legally blind either and yet I did suddenly at the age of 25. I hope if you dismantle BESB you will know where to call in your time of need. And finally if you ever need services, I hope there will be someone there to tell you that your life will be all right and the specialized service delivery system needed will be there also.