

CONNECTICUT RADIO

*Connecticut's Talking Newsstand
for the Blind and Print-Handicapped*

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INFORMATION SYSTEM

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**Testimony by Diane Weaver Dunne
Executive Director of CRIS Radio**

Re: Public Hearing on SB 1012

March 4, 2011

To Members of the Appropriations Committee:

Merging services for the blind and the deaf under the Department of Social Services is not a new idea. But it is a bad idea.

Several studies conclude that separate programs for the blind have significantly better outcomes. A study about to be published by scholars at Mississippi State University found that separate agencies serve a greater percentage of legally blind people - 52 percent versus 42 percent - compared with combined agencies. Also, separate agencies for the blind provide more comprehensive services and invest on average 61 percent more money in training and other services. With such a strikingly greater investment, it is not surprising that separate agencies for the blind have a higher rehabilitation rate with nearly twice as many likely to be self-supporting when their services conclude.

Separate agencies also help the blind earn better wages, according to yet another, recent analysis. The competitive employment rate of legally blind clients was significantly higher when they were served in a separate agency for the blind. [I've included a copy of the abstract of this 110-page study with my testimony. The full study can be found at <http://www.nfbmi.org/downloads/MississippiStateStudyMono.doc>]

These and other federally funded studies have found that true cost effectiveness, efficient and timely service, focused management, and competent, targeted leadership produce better rehabilitation outcomes for people who are blind.

The proposed consolidation of administrative functions proposed under this bill will likely reduce the quality of service inherent with complex bureaucracies while NOT realizing meaningful savings -- about \$300,000 after factoring in the loss of federal reimbursement dollar.

We all have to share the pain to reduce the state's \$3.2 billion deficit. But the proposed bill saves just 1/100th percent of that amount while slashing the BESB board's voice to that of an advisory function and dissecting its continuum of services. There is no evidence that such a move will improve services to the blind; rather, studies demonstrate just the opposite.

To further illustrate the negative impact of the proposal, funding for the Connecticut Radio Information System will no longer be a line item in the state budget. Although CRIS Radio is the only radio reading service in the state, broadcasting news and information 24 hours a day, seven days a week, clearly providing an invaluable service to the state with the help of nearly 350 volunteers, the elimination of CRIS Radio as a line item is a red flag that should serve as a warning to lawmakers who sincerely care about services for the blind and disabled. Although CRIS is wrapped into the

proposed budget, the state's only radio reading service will no longer have the protection of funding as a line item. It's a significant difference going forward as BESB's board will only serve in an advisory capacity.

Do the right thing. There are a number of ways to reform government and its spending while IMPROVING services, not diminishing them. As lawmakers, this will be your legacy.