Tuesday, March 15, 2011

Testimony to the Human Services Committee re: Senate Bill #1012

from Cindy Reed-Brown, M.Ed. COMS

Thank you for the opportunity to testify with regards to SB 1012

I have been an Education Consultant at BESB for almost 17 years and a professional in the vision field for over 20. I have a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education from the University of Virginia, and a Master's in Education, Vision Studies, from Boston College. I am a certified teacher of the visually impaired and I hold national certification as an Orientation and Mobility (O&M) Specialist. I have taught as adjunct faculty in the graduate program at UMASS Boston, and served on the Board of Directors for the Northeast Chapter of AERBVI, the only international organization for professionals in the blindness field, for over 15 years.

I have worked in 2 other states that do not have a centralized model (Virginia and Massachusetts), and I am here today to testify about the importance of centralized services in Connecticut for people who are blind or visually impaired.

I'll start with the obvious advantages for our clients/parents and staff of being able to quickly and easily find the best person to answer questions, provide information, or initiate services. We now have management that understands blindness and visual impairment and is focused 100% on issues that affect CT citizens who are blind or visually impaired, from the smallest premature baby to our senior citizens facing vision loss in later life. We have divisions that work effectively together and collaborate to provide direct and consultative services and avoid duplication of efforts.

Our various divisions share services like our professional resource library, our 60,000 volume (and growing) braille and large print library (along with the braille unit staff who produce braille and coordinate book production for children and adults), a lending library of specialized materials and equipment for those with vision loss, our low vision center and our assistive technology lab (both of which house multiple pieces of very expensive equipment), and our special assistants and braillists who do work for multiple divisions. We share purchasing functions among divisions, and an incredibly detailed and efficient consolidated client database. Currently, our management is able to make decisions about how to best use our shared resources.

Dividing us up and sending us to agencies without expertise in blindness issues would be disastrous for the quality and quantity of services, both in the short and long terms,

and would require extensive and expensive duplication of resources and services. The proposed structural changes to BESB will not save the state money and the adverse effects on services to our students and clients are unacceptable.

The many collaborative programs that we provide would be affected because they occur within our facility and/or utilize the expertise of staff from multiple divisions: Parent education programs, professional workshops for classroom teachers, special education teachers, birth-to-3 personnel, paraprofessionals, therapists and other district staff members working with our students, professional inservice training for optometrists and ophthalmologists who work with our students and clients, as well as those who provide low vision services, transition school-to-work programs, technology expos, daily living skills programs, sports and adventure programs, weekend and summer programs, family field trips with educational components for parents and students, and programs to train others in issues of deafblindness and multiple disabilities. We need to be together under one roof with an Executive Director who understands blindness and visual impairment and knows what support we need to continue to provide the high quality services that our clients, students and families have come to expect.

Sending our Children's Services division to the SDE is not a good plan; the last time this proposal was made (2003), the then-Commissioner of the Dept. of Education testified that they would do away with state services and simply send the money to the towns. In Massachusetts, where that is indeed the model for providing vision services, I worked as a teacher of the visually impaired, an O&M specialist, and as the supervisor of vision services at a small non-profit agency. Here are some of the difficulties my students and I faced:

- Vision professionals worked in different places and for different agencies or districts; there was little communication among professionals.
- No one provided continuing education for teachers of the visually impaired or for O&M instructors in the state; it was hard to get enough continuing education units (CEUs) to maintain certification, and I ended up attending any inservice I could find in a school; things that didn't have anything to do with my job just so I could get the CEUs.
- No professional resource library or mentoring support.
- No inservice training programs for classroom teachers or paraprofessionals; therefore, every time a student got a new teacher or para, I had to start all over providing information and training; every student, every year.

- No braille transcription classes for paraprofessionals or teachers; I had to teach everyone myself, and my efforts were being duplicated time and time again by other teachers across the state.
- No programs to teach social skills, daily living skills or to address other areas of the Expanded Core Curriculum, were provided by the schools.
- There was no way to connect students and families with each other, except by chance.
- It was hard to coordinate with the Vocational Rehabilitation counselors, because they worked for someone else; I saw my students' counselor about once a year at the annual IEP meeting.
- It was hard for towns to find teachers of the visually impaired and O&M instructors; since services were so fragmented, and since we had to spend so much time doing training over and over again, there weren't enough teachers to go around.
- Even with the money, resources and connections of Perkins School for the Blind (the primary provider of early intervention services), the Carroll Center for the Blind (a blindness rehab facility), and with a university program for teacher preparation, there were, and still are, areas in Massachusetts which have NO services.
- If a town had less than a full caseload (and most did, as they do here in CT as well) teachers and towns either negotiated individual contracts—usually with no insurance and no benefits, so not much loyalty—or the town went to a 3rd party agency or a collaborative to find services, which resulted in significantly higher costs due to the extra layers of overhead and paperwork. At my agency in Massachusetts, teachers didn't stay more than a year or two; there were better opportunities and better supports elsewhere. The program where I worked doesn't even exist anymore. For 2 years after I moved to CT, I still got calls from towns in MA who were willing to pay me to travel back to provide services because they couldn't find anyone closer.
- Every town had to buy their own braille and large print books and specialized equipment; every student, every year. With the exception of federal quota items through American Printing House for the Blind, which are quite limited, there was no centralized lending library. If a student stopped using/needing an item, it just sat on a shelf somewhere. If a student in another town needed that item, there was no way to know that it was available; the second town simply bought another. This is a big deal when a single braille book can cost in the thousands (and take months to produce), and many students use expensive computer equipment to access educational materials.

When the next round of budget cuts comes through (and it will), will my new agency director be able to once again rally our staff together to cut costs, and will he or she make cuts where they are least likely to affect services? Or will it be easier to just cut the newest addition to a huge agency because “we don’t really fit with the mission of the agency anyway.”

If BESB’s services are transferred to the SDE and DSS, what will services look like for my students in 5 or 10 years? Will their parents be able to find someone who can help them understand the educational implications of their child’s vision loss? Or will they get lost in 2 huge agencies, one overseeing a great variety of “all things education” (but not direct services) and one trying to meet the needs of a tremendously diverse population, neither with knowledge of visual impairment? Will the SDE understand the effectiveness and efficiency of continuing state-provided services for people who are blind or visually impaired? Or will they decide that it’s not part of their mission, and ask the districts and TVIs to fend for themselves? I have already described what that model of services is like.

And yes, I’ll ask the question that I think many of us are asking ourselves secretly in our heads:

If you do this, what will my job be like in 5 years? Will I have any support from someone who knows what I’m supposed to be doing? Will I be able to knock on the open door of my agency director and let him know what I think about a proposal to improve a particular service or process in my agency, and have him actually listen? Will my director know anything about visual impairment or blindness? Will my agency continue to work with consumer groups? Will I have access to coordinated professional inservice training for my families and teams? Or will I have to educate all the parents, teachers, paraprofessionals, PTs, OTs, SLPs, music, art and gym teachers of all my students every year by myself? Will I have access to professional development activities that meet my needs and improve my teaching skills, or will I have to go out of state to get my own continuing education in the vision field? Will I be able to find and collaborate with the other people who are working with my students and families? Or will I be lucky to see them once a year? And if I have trouble with these issues, won’t the families I work with, especially those newly thrust into the “system” when their baby is born blind, have even more difficulty?

Please keep BESB intact as a single stand-alone agency with the ability to provide coordinated services to Connecticut residents of all ages who are blind or visually impaired, and continue providing us with an Executive Director who has the knowledge, experience and expertise to guide us. Thank you.