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Governor's Bill No. 1012  
To the Human Services Committee:

I am testifying today to object to the Senate Bill #1012 and show my support for keeping the Board of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) as a separate agency focused solely on serving the blind community in Connecticut. Visual impairment is a low incidence disability although if you look at our family you wouldn't know it. We are a family with 2 children with visual impairments and BESB has become an integral and much needed part of our lives. Visual impairment impacts learning so drastically that it requires many specialized needs that are hard to understand. BESB has been a resource for our family and has been able to streamline services for our children without interruption.

The proposed splitting of the agency would cause our children to be covered by 2 different agencies creating confusion and inconvenience. If their services are under agencies that do not understand visual impairment and have no experience in blindness related issues their services will become inadequate and put our children's future in jeopardy. A commissioner of one of these agencies will find it difficult to understand the importance of the blindness and related services and they may cut them at the state level. My fear is that the State Department of Education would simply give the money to towns and do away with state services. Towns are not in a position to hire their own teachers of the visually impaired for 1 or 2 students; Newtown at this time has only 2 Braille reading students. This would likely result in no services to our children, who need so much specialized instruction. Although the intent might not be to impact services, the result will.

Blindness and visual impairment can be isolating. Even in the special education community we are isolated, my children have very different educational needs than most other disabilities. Most educational strategies rely heavily on visual aides to help teach concepts, aides that are not useful for my blind son. My children's education will suffer without a separate agency and specifically trained staff who understand and teach alternative strategies not only to my child but to the local educational team that is involved with his direct instruction. Each new school year means a new team of teachers who are unfamiliar with my children and the impact of blindness on their education. Often the BESB team members are the ones who are consistent from year to year and can offer some continuity in his education.

When my younger son, Kevin, who is 12 years old and has been blind since birth, was a baby a teacher of the visually impaired came to our house every week to work with him and us. She was a wealth of information, and was able to tell us how blind adults functioned and did things. This gave us hope for his future at a time when we were

grieving and confused. Instead of becoming stuck on “would he be able to do something” we were shown that we needed to focus on the “how will he do something.” One of the first things she commented to Kevin was “I can see everyone has been handing you toys,” who knew...you shouldn’t hand a blind baby a toy. In order for my son to develop as a competent blind individual he needed to be challenged in ways that a sighted child is naturally. A sighted child can see a toy out of their reach and try to get to it. We needed to put the toy in different places, touching him, so he could reach and find it, otherwise he would grow up thinking things magically appear in front of him. He needed to learn that the toys had a place and he could go and find them to play. Also, when he was starting to pull up to standing, his orientation and mobility instructor suggested we not speed this up because he would only get this view of the world, from crawling, now and once he was on his feet he probably would not go back down, who knew...you shouldn’t urge a blind baby to walk sooner.

When the visual rehabilitation therapist asked at a parent workshop a couple years ago, who is still cutting up their children’s food, my hand went up along with others, her response, “stop.”... who knew how important this is, I thought I was helping.

I’ll tell you who knew, the highly trained and experienced individuals who make up BESB and make it the strong successful agency it is today.

I have had to change my thinking and my actions. As a parent who has dealt with the needs of my visually impaired children for 18 years, I am continually learning and I need the expertise of the many individuals from BESB. Each developmental level requires new skills and more instruction. BESB parent workshops offer me insight into the impact that visual impairment has throughout a person’s life. They offer parent workshops that address specific issues of raising visually impaired children.

I counted the individuals from BESB that have been involved in the education of my children thus far and came up with 19. 19 dedicated educators working together and communicating to ensure my children get their needs met. Thankfully the BESB educators who work with my children have access to individuals who work with blind adults and they can use their experience to help plan what skills my children will need as adults and how to teach them.

Kevin is currently in 6<sup>th</sup> grade in a public school in Newtown with support from a teacher of the visually impaired and an orientation and mobility instructor, both from BESB. His needs are very specialized and necessitate instruction from highly trained educators in Braille, assistive technology, orientation and mobility skills, daily living skills, social skills, and recreation skills. BESB has worked hard to offer many programs for visually impaired children in order to address these specialized areas of instruction known as the expanded core curriculum for blind and visually impaired students. These programs give the children an opportunity to be with visually impaired peers who are experiencing the same issues. Blindness can be quite isolating when a child is surrounded by sighted peers. Instruction in the expanded core curriculum is critical to a blind child’s wellbeing.

Joseph, my 20 year old, has low vision, his needs were not as extensive when he was younger but as he got closer to transition age those needs grew. He is having success in college due to BESB staff having knowledge of him and working hard on his transition.

His transition from high school to college was an extremely difficult time; he had many supports in place in high school that would no longer be in place at the college level. For him to have success at the college level he needed to learn to advocate for himself and understand what accommodations he needed. For Joseph, an intensive transition program was needed and was facilitated by his vocational rehabilitation counselor and teacher of the visually impaired from BESB, who knew him and his strengths and weaknesses. At such a vulnerable time in his life a switch to a new agency and new unfamiliar people would have set him back and possibly ended his college hopes.

As a parent of two blind children who have benefitted from BESB services I feel I am in the position to be able to evaluate potential difficulties that would develop if the split were allowed.

*Duplicity of resources* – Blind individuals require much assistance, including Braille printing, technology services, Braille instruction, orientation and mobility instruction, transition to college services, transition to work services, support of athletic programs and others. They are now adequately addressed under one service provider but would require additional personnel and equipment if divided.

*Additional bureaucracy* – specifically at the critical time of life when transition from secondary school to college or to the workforce occurs. This is currently seamless and efficient but will produce another unnecessary layer of bureaucracy if the agency is split between 2 departments.

*Potential for diminished services* – the agency already lost positions and may have additional cuts. Transfer of the split agency to 2 existing large departments with individuals who don't have visual impairment knowledge in a position of power will most likely result in diluted services with funding being absorbed into the larger pot. The savings implied in the reorganization are miniscule compared to the disruption and potential lack of services to blind children and adults that can ultimately affect them for a lifetime. Putting the teachers of the visually impaired under State Department of Education seems like a short sighted plan. This agency does not provide direct services or have any knowledge of the specialized educational needs of children who are blind. They are not prepared to implement the kind of programming BESB client's need. It is a conflict of interest since they are involved with evaluating and monitoring educational programs not offering direct services.

The current BESB structure allows for a continuum of care throughout a person's life. This continuum will be lost if the agency is split. Division of the current BESB agency into 2 separate departments is unlikely to result in cost savings, increased efficiency or streamlining. The blind community, being unique, requires a strengthening of the current system, not division and reduction.

Thank you for your consideration.  
Laurie Eckler