

Testimony Against Consolidation of the Board of Education and Services for the Blind

Dear Members of the Appropriations Committee:

I am writing you to strongly request that you consider the serious and detrimental implications of the possible consolidation of the Board of Education & Services for the Blind (BESB) into one or more larger state agencies. I am in a unique position to see the negative impact of this proposed consolidation from two perspectives. One: I was born legally blind do to a rare genetic condition and have lived most of my life here in Connecticut. Secondly, I have been employed by the agency as a Rehabilitation Teacher in the Adult Services Division for more than six years, BESB has four major divisions: the Adult Services Division (which serves adults of ages, but serves a disproportionately larger number of seniors), Children's Services, Vocational Rehabilitation, and the Business Enterprise Division.

On a personal level, BESB has been an invaluable source of support to me throughout my life. Shortly after my birth, a social worker and Educational Consultant from BESB began working with my parents. My parents always had high praise for staff of the agency, but particularly during the early years when they knew little about raising a child with a severe disability. BESB staff shared with them warmth, compassion, and knowledge. My parents were given much guidance in the areas of development of a young child who was blind - right down to finding a completely inclusive pre-school program. BESB staff even worked with the pre-school staff to ensure that I received every opportunity to thrive. In the years that followed, other staff from the Children's Services Division provided support to me by making certain I was able to take advantage of low vision services, had accessible large print education materials materials, appropriate classroom accommodations, and access to technology which would enable me to keep pace with my peers.

During my high school years, Educational Consultants and Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors from BESB worked collaboratively with me in academic planning, providing opportunities for career exploration, and assistance with the college search process. Both during and after college, Counselors from the Vocational Rehabilitation Division worked with me in areas such as job readiness training which included items such as resume development and strategies for marketing myself as someone who could readily compete with my fully-sighted peers. They also provided other invaluable services such O&M training which gave me both the knowledge and confidence to travel independently while utilizing public transportation and as a pedestrian at busy street crossings.

None of the services provided to me nor any other client at BESB happens in a vacuum. There is continual consultation and collaboration among the various disciplines and divisions to allow each client the best possible service outcome. Each of the divisions is aimed at working with clients at various stages in the lives of our clients. Additionally, because most of our clients cannot have their vision improved through physical restoration, their need for some services may be ongoing or may evolve over time. Consolidating the agency into one or more larger state agencies will at the very least fracture this process and will lessen opportunities to make people independent. It will likely also have an impact on the quality of our services as services delivered through one smaller centralized agency where all specialized services and facilities exist is more efficient.

Again, thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

Mark G. Rafferty, MS