

Peggy Palmer, Haddam CT

3/14/11

I am here to oppose Senate Bill No. 1012

- I am a preschool teacher of the blind, employed by BESB
- The changes being proposed in this budget do not put my job in jeopardy. I do not come before you today to protect my job. Instead, I would like to focus my remarks to what splitting this agency would do to the services we provide to the blind and visually impaired citizens of our state.
- Blindness is an all encompassing sensory loss. Despite what people think, it is NOT a death sentence. However, blindness and visual impairment strike at every aspect of our lives: social, academic, self-care, technology use, physical activity, travel and mobility, to name a few. It cuts across all boundaries- age, gender, career, education.
- Working in this field, for me, is a privilege. My job is to assess what tools my young students need in order to be fully successful and to get those tools into their hands (as well as teach them how to use them). The key is to empower a blind child (or adult) to function in the sighted world.
- As people with visual impairment change through their lives, their needs change as well. That's what makes having one, comprehensive agency, (in our case, BESB) such a huge factor. We are able and ready to get the tools that folks need into their hands, along with the training they might need. A splintered service delivery model cannot do this.
- The Dept of Education ranks BESB in the top 5 states in the country for high school graduation rates, job placement rates and average annual salaries for our blind and visually impaired citizens.
- States with splintered delivery systems do not compare favorably to our rates. What sense does it make to take a successful, streamlined and accountable agency for the blind, with a proven track record, and carve it up? The nationwide statistics about unemployment and the blind are dismal.
- I would like to close with a short vignette. As a preschool teacher, I work with the youngest clients. A few years ago, out of the collaborative efforts of the professionals who work with children and adults at BESB, we challenged ourselves to put employment as a top priority for everyone we serve. At first, I confess, I thought, how crazy is this? I can't put the 3 year olds I work with to work!! But soon afterward, I was visiting a preschool where one of my totally blind little students was attending school. They were planning field trips for the class and wanted my input. "We want to show the children different work environments" they told me. I thought, here it is, my chance to insert "employment" into this 3 year old's curriculum. The preschool was heading off to a post office and a fire department. I suggested that they add a visit to a school principal and a visit to a children's book author (both things a blind/visually impaired person could do). They agreed and I was once again thankful that I have the good fortune to work in a full service, life span agency for the blind.