

Dear Senators/Representatives

I am testifying today in regards to the bill SB1012 which recommends consolidating various state agencies. I realize that the state of Connecticut is in financial trouble, but I ask you at what expense are you willing to save Connecticut money. BESB provides vital services for the Blind, and without their services, I would not have been able to testify that the blind need BESB.

Without BESB, the 50% unemployment rate for the blind will rise to around 75%. The 95% graduation rate for high school students who are blind will decrease to the national average of 55%. The reason why I bring these facts to your attention is cause I could have fallen through the cracks and be unemployed without a college degree or even a high school diploma. BESB supported me during my early childhood up until after my graduation from the University of Connecticut. Through my early youth, they provided education, rehabilitation, and mobility services. As I got older they provided visual aids, vocational skills, supported my college education, and paid for necessary eye exams, contacts, and glasses. My parents knew nothing about raising a legally blind child, but BESB assisted my parents on my development to have a normal life.

Despite the fact that I am legally blind, I aspired to do things that most individuals would think that a visually impaired person would not be able to do. I studied photography at the University of Connecticut and, I photographed the 1995 Special Olympic World Games in New Haven. In 2000, I participated in the Boston to New York AIDS Ride in which I rode my bike for 275 miles and raised 1,700 dollars for AIDS research. Without BESB, I would not have had the skills to take part in these events or graduate from UConn.

I am very fortunate that BESB provided rehabilitation services for me as a child, and vocational skills as an adult. If it was up to a minority of people, I would not have been able to attend a mainstream school or graduate from a conventional college. BESB was my advocate and know I am not only an advocate for BESB, but I am also an activist for the blind. Blind children deserve to have a normal life, and be able to follow their dreams. Blind students will not get the same type of service if BESB is consolidated into other agencies as compared to the service that I had when I was a child. By consolidating BESB, this Bill would actually be cutting services. I urge you not to merge BESB at the expense of the blind because in the long run Connecticut will pay a heavy price.

Sincerely Yours,

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***The National Federation of the Blind
of Connecticut***

**Testimony in Opposition
to Senate Bill 967**

March 10, 2003

**Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee
by Fredric K. Schroeder, Ph.D.**

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, my name is Fredric Schroeder. I am a research professor at San Diego State University working in the area of vocational rehabilitation. Under the Clinton Administration, I served as the Commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration which is the Federal agency for support and oversight of State rehabilitation agencies including the Connecticut Board of Education and Services for the Blind. Prior to my time serving as Commissioner, I worked for eight years as the director of the New Mexico Commission for the Blind which is the counterpart agency to the Board of Education and Services for the Blind for providing blindness related services in that State. I have also worked as a special education administrator and have held state and national offices in organizations of the blind.

I am here today to urge you not to reorganize State services for the blind by moving services presently administered by the Board of Education and Services for the Blind into other agencies of State government. It is my understanding that the Legislature is seeking to address a number of concerns with the current operations of the agency through this reorganization. You are to be commended for your serious attention to the needs of blind people in Connecticut. Nevertheless, it is my professional opinion, supported by data and experience, that moving the Board of Education and Services for the Blind into the Department of Social Services and moving its educational services to the State Department of Education will make it unlikely that blind people in the State will have the opportunity to receive the services and training they need to become productive, integrated members of society.

ADVANTAGES OF SEPARATE AGENCIES FOR THE BLIND

There are many reasons why blind people support separate agencies for the

blind. In general separate agencies for the blind offer two major advantages: they bring together all services needed by blind people in a coordinated way; and, they are more subject to political pressure brought forth by blind people in the State.

When services for the blind are part of a larger agency, they do not have the same focus or visibility as they have in separate agencies for the blind. The blindness programs must compete with the other programs of the larger agency. The blind program has virtually no profile with the legislature. The director of blind services generally does not defend his or her budget and, if he or she does, it is after the budget has been approved by the parent agency. These are some of the functional problems associated with inclusion in a larger agency, but, the real problem is that blind people are a small voice in the affairs of the larger agency. Blind people seeking change do not have a viable way of bringing serious attention to their concerns under an umbrella, super-agency structure. Typically, the Secretary of the umbrella agency has no background or experience in blindness and has little time to devote to affairs of the blind.

As a separate agency, blind people in the state can meet with a director whose sole responsibility is services for the blind. If the director is unresponsive, blind people can take their complaints to the Board and, if the Board is unresponsive, they can press the Governor to make changes in the agency's leadership. This is the method that has proven to be the most effective in insuring quality services in States throughout the Nation. It may be argued that an agency's structure cannot guarantee responsive treatment of blind people. Of course, responsiveness is, in many respects, a product of the individuals involved. While this is true, the separate agency structure has proven time and time again to create the environment in which services flourish and become responsive and effective.

THE NEW MEXICO EXPERIENCE

After more than twenty years of effort to reform services for the blind in New Mexico, blind people led the effort to restructure services for the blind in the State. Prior to that time, blind services were part of a larger agency and, more to the point, they were very poor. Few blind people in the State found work at all. Few had the skills such as Braille or cane travel they needed to train for or find employment. Few had the confidence to believe that work was possible. As a result, services for the blind in New Mexico were ranked among the worst in the Nation.

In 1986, a separate agency for the blind was created-the New Mexico Commission for the Blind. In a relatively short time, services improved until, eight years later when I left the State to move to Washington to assume my position as Commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration, services for blind people in the State were the best in the Nation. How do I know this? The New Mexico Commission for the Blind was ranked higher than any other State rehabilitation agency in terms of the wages earned by blind clients-even though New Mexico is one of the poorest States in the country. The proportion of blind people who earned enough to eliminate their need for Social Security disability

benefits was three times higher than the average of blind people in other States. College enrollment of blind people was much greater than college enrollment of blind people in other States, and blind people in the State, for the first time, had confidence and hope for the future.

These are the data. They speak to a system that, by its very structure, worked in partnership with the blind of the State and supported their belief in their right and ability to become self-supporting, contributing members of society. Could this happen under an umbrella structure? Perhaps so, but, it didn't. It didn't in New Mexico and it hasn't anywhere else. I recognize that you are seeking to make change that will strengthen services for the blind in Connecticut, but, moving the Board of Education and Services for the Blind under an umbrella agency that is only tangentially related to its mission will serve to further weaken services in the State.

NATIONAL DATA SUPPORTING SEPARATE AGENCIES FOR THE BLIND

National data show that blind people served through separate agencies for the blind are nearly twice as likely to be self-supporting at closure. A study concerning the efficacy of separate programs for the blind has recently been published by Cavanaugh, Giesen, and Pierce at Mississippi State University. Based on an analysis of Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) national data, they found that, when compared to the more generic combined state rehabilitation agencies, separate agencies for the blind served people who are more socially and economically disadvantaged, have more severe visual impairments, and have more secondary disabilities.

Of all visually impaired individuals, separate agencies for the blind accept a larger percentage of legally blind people, 52 percent versus 42 percent in combined agencies. Separate agencies for the blind provide more comprehensive services, that is, more services to people with the most severe visual impairments, and separate agencies for the blind invest on average 61 percent more money in training and other services, \$3,597 versus \$2,241 in combined agencies. With such a strikingly greater investment, it is not surprising that separate agencies for the blind have a higher rehabilitation rate; that is, they are successful with a higher percentage of people who are accepted for and receive rehabilitation services. And separate agencies close a lower percentage of legally blind people as non-wage earning homemakers; and perhaps most significant, (as mentioned above) people served by separate agencies for the blind are nearly twice as likely to be self-supporting at closure.

The finding of better wages is supported by a recent analysis by Cavanaugh of fiscal year 1996 national data. The analysis concluded that the competitive employment rate of legally blind clients was significantly higher in separate agencies for the blind. These findings and other studies argue for a policy of continued support, in fact, a policy of increased support for separate agencies for the blind.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Maintain A Separate Blind Agency

Blind people have unique needs that are best addressed by specialized services provided through separate agencies for the blind. Moving various programs to different agencies within State government will result in a lack of coordination of needed services and will not address the current administrative problems facing the Agency.

2. Policy Board

Currently, the Board of Education and Services for the Blind has a Board, appointed by the Governor. In practice the Board has advisory authority only. This means that blind people in Connecticut do not have an effective way of pressing for change within the agency. The Legislature should consider vesting policy authority in the Board and should consider giving the Board the responsibility of hiring and firing the director. This will strengthen the responsive nature of the agency and make it more accountable to its constituents.

3. Partnership With Blind People

There has been a long history of blind people supporting separate agencies for the blind. But to gain and maintain that support requires the agency for the blind to win the confidence and trust and, most important, the loyalty of blind people in the state. Rehabilitation agencies must believe in blind people and must recognize that the blind of the state must have a real voice in shaping the programs and services of the agency--a partnership resulting in good jobs with good wages and with good upward mobility potential.

4. How Best to Address Current Administrative Problems

It is reasonable, in fact commendable for the Legislature to seek solutions to the administrative problems which have plagued the Board of Education and Services for the Blind for many years. Nevertheless, the administration of an agency cannot be viewed independent of its programmatic functions. The Legislature should not sacrifice the organizational structure that gives the agency the best chance of success. Rather than a new structure--moving the Board of Education and Services for the Blind into the Department of Social Services where it will become only a very small part of an agency with a much broader mission--the present structure should be strengthened. This should be done by a review of the agency's operations within the context of the agency's programmatic responsibilities. It is recommended that a review of the administrative structure be conducted by a team of experts who are well versed and experienced in the operations of effective programs for the blind in other States and who have the administrative background to make recommendations that will give the Board of Education and Services for the Blind greater accountability and will improve the effectiveness of its services.

SUMMARY

Connecticut is in jeopardy of deluding services for the blind of the State if it pursues the plan to eliminate the separate agency structure. National data show that, on every important measure, separate agencies are superior in helping blind people to become self-supporting. Of course, the Legislature is not proposing eliminating employment training or other services. Rather, SB-967 reorganizes services for the blind. The Governor's proposed budget for the biennium beginning July 1, 2003 would transfer funding for children's services to the State Board of Education and the agency's other programs to the Department of Social Services. Nevertheless, in so doing, the State is in danger of eliminating the very thing that has distinguished effective programs for the blind in other States—a sole focus on programs for the blind within a structure that allows for maximum responsiveness and accountability to the blind of the State. Blind people in Connecticut need and deserve the opportunity to receive services from an agency that believes in their capacity and is responsive to their needs and priorities. By its very design the separate agency structure allows for continuity of services and responds to the particular needs of blind people in the State. I strongly urge the Committee to vote no on SB-967 and work to strengthen the structure of the existing system to make it more responsive and accountable to the blind of Connecticut.