

HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE Public Hearing Senate Bill No. 1012

Proposed Elimination & Division of BESB: March 15, 2011

Dear Co-Chair Musto, Co-Chair Tercyak, Vice Chair Coleman, Vice Chair Morris, Ranking Member Markley, Ranking Member Gibbons and the Members of the Human Services Committee:

My name is Tina Gutierrez. I am a Certified Teacher of Students with Visual Impairments who proudly serves students with visual impairments & additional disabilities, including students who are deafblind, as a BESB Education Consultant. I respectfully ask you to vote against Senate Bill No. 1012 which proposes the elimination of BESB and the consolidation of education services within the State Department of Education and the remainder of services to the Department of Social Services.

BESB serves a low-incidence population with highly specialized needs. Within this centralized agency; highly trained service providers including Teachers of the Visually Impaired, Orientation & Mobility Specialists, Vision Rehabilitation Therapists, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors, Technology Specialists and Adult Services Personnel are able to provide coordinated services to approximately 1100 blind and visually impaired children and approximately 12,000 legally blind adults in the great state of Connecticut.

On paper, this bill's intent is to reduce cost to the state while maintaining services to our clients with blindness. However, dividing a streamlined agency with professionals who collaborate and support each other will jeopardize the quality of the services provided to our clients, while actually increasing cost to the state.

Splitting BESB would result in reduced programming for our clients. BESB is well known for its ability to work together between divisions to create high quality programs for clients, parents, teachers, paraprofessionals, potential employers, and low vision providers. Programs include: parent, vocational, technology, student skills of daily living, sports programs, weekend programs, summer programs, transition programs, teacher in-services, OT, PT and PE teacher in-services, paraprofessional in-services, CEU trainings, deafblind and multiple disability training, as well as others. BESB also houses numerous training programs within their facility. With the proposed new model; expertise for these training events would be lost, as well as the facilities to hold them.

BESB is truly seen as a model centralized state agency by other states and organizations. It is efficient and knowledgeable. Birth to three agencies, school personnel, employers, concerned family members, as well as the medical community; have direct access to knowledge, expertise, and compassion for clients with vision impairments, multiple disabilities, and deafblindness in one united, centralized agency for the blind: BESB.

Consolidating BESB Children's Services with the State Department of Education is a short term plan. The SDE is an agency that provides technical assistance. They evaluate and monitor educational programs. The SDE does not provide direct service to students nor do they have knowledge of the specialized needs of educating students with vision impairments, students with vision impairment and additional disabilities, or students who are deafblind. Currently, there is a temporary Commissioner of Education; no one knows who will be running the department. In the past when such a consolidation was proposed, the SDE stated they would simply give the money to towns and do away with state services; a likely scenario again. The implications of this are frightening to BESB families and will ultimately cost towns much more in the long run. Towns are not in a position to hire their own teachers for 1 or 2 students one year, 5-6 the next, and perhaps none the following year. This would likely result in no services being provided for students with vision impairments. Although the intent might not be to impact services, the result will.

Consolidating the remainder of BESB; Adult Services, Vocational Rehabilitation, and the Business Enterprise Program within the Department of Social Services, would put increased strain on a state agency with already high caseload levels and an aging computer client data system. Counselors and other case managers of DSS do not have the expertise to support clients with blindness in the transition from high school graduation to higher education or employment, to support adults in their work place with specialized technology and orientation and mobility, or to support clients in their homes, or in veteran programs. CT constituents who are blind will be lost in this overflowing agency; their direct services negatively impacted.

Ultimately; the splitting of BESB and the consolidation of the various divisions into larger agencies would cost the state more money than it would save. BESB, as a united centralized agency, houses resources shared by all divisions. Just a few of these shared resources include a braille embosser ("printer"-approx \$50,000); a Low Vision Center with CCTVs (approx \$3,000) and other low vision devices; an Assistive Technology Lab with specialized software (\$1,000) and other technology devises such as a Braille Note Taker (approx \$6,000). We share a Professional Library as well as a Braille Unit and Library that houses volunteers who prepare Braille for children as well as adults and 60,000 volumes of Braille books. If SB No. 1012 passes; these resources would indeed need to be duplicated to serve blind constituents who would then be served by 2 larger, individual agencies. This duplication would result in quite an increased cost to the state.

As a centralized agency; BESB provides resources and expertise to support our clients throughout the transitions of the life span seamlessly. Under the head of a knowledgeable and compassionate Executive Director; we are held accountable for providing efficient, cost saving services to our clients. We proudly do so without impacting the quality of our services.

I respectfully ask that SB No. 1012 be defeated. Please allow BESB to remain a centralized agency to do what we do best; to serve our clients with vision impairments, additional disabilities, deafblindness, and blindness with high quality direct services, in a variety of settings across the lifespan, in both an efficient and cost saving manner.

I thank-you for your time and consideration; Respectfully Submitted,

Tina Gutierrez

Certified Teacher of Students with Visual Impairments, M.Ed.

Watertown, Connecticut