

Date: March 15, 2011

Testimony presented to: Human services Committee

Re: Opposition to Senate Bill 1012 (proposed merger of Board of Education and Services for the Blind)

From: William Webb, 12 Sharon Dr., Wallingford, CT

My name is William Webb and I am testifying in opposition to Senate Bill 1012 which would have the Board of Education and Services for the Blind merged with the Department of Social Services and The Department of Education.

For the past 24 years, I have worked at BESB as an orientation and mobility specialist serving blind children and adults. In short, my role is to teach people who are blind, the techniques and strategies that will allow them to travel as safely and independently as possible. Orientation and mobility instruction is one of the specialized services that BESB offers. Blindness has long been recognized as a disability that presents unique and substantial challenges to those who live with it everyday. It is the likely reason that over 100 years ago, the State of Connecticut saw fit to create a stand alone agency to help their fellow citizens reach their full potential.

My experience at BESB has been a fulfilling one and I am grateful to those I serve. They have given me a deep appreciation for what it means to face monumental challenges with grace and determination. I want to offer three brief scenarios to highlight what I mean and why I feel so strongly about the comprehensive service delivery of BESB.

Young parents of a new born are given the news that they already suspected, their son is blind. A young man driving home from work is involved in a horrific accident; he survives with life altering injuries, including blindness. An elderly woman, newly diagnosed with macular degeneration, struggles to remain in her own home and avoid a nursing home. The common thread is obvious, it is blindness. A second common bond is BESB, where all those described will look to for training, guidance and hope.

For the baby, over the next quarter of a century, he will likely receive services from the three divisions of BESB, Children's Services, Vocational Rehabilitation and Adult Services. He will participate in programs jointly coordinated between divisions, focusing on technology, mobility and daily living skills. At key points in his development, those services will overlap to ensure a successful transition such as to college, job or his own apartment.

For the car accident survivor, he will soon come to know BESB either in the hospital or at the rehab center that he has entered to recover from his multiple injuries. A social worker from Adult Services will visit him, assess his blindness-related needs and bring in an orientation and mobility specialist and rehabilitation teacher when he is strong enough to participate. Adult services will provide the training to help him gain a level of independence in his home and community so that he can turn his focus to job training and the goal of re-entering the job market. That will involve a transition into Vocational

Rehabilitation and staff members of both divisions will work closely to ensure his success.

Finally, the elderly woman, with macular degeneration, who is trying to stay in the home where she raised her family, she will be served primarily by Adult Services, receiving low vision services and rehabilitation teaching to help her gain the compensatory skills to continue to live independently. Adult Services may also provide orientation and mobility services and find her a volunteer to visit, read mail and take her on errands.

I offer these examples because they highlight the diversity of the needs of the people that BESB serves. Even with our comprehensive service model, our experienced staff of specialists, our library, Braille unit, technology and low vision labs, we know there are more challenges to overcome to deliver the highest level of services. It is difficult to imagine how a divided BESB could come close to serving the blind citizens of Connecticut better than we do now.

An elderly client once said to me, "blindness is hard, it's sure not for sissies". She was right. Please don't make it harder with the passing of this bill. Thank you for your time and consideration.