

March 14, 2011

To: Human Services Committee

Regarding: Senate Bill 1012 and the elimination of BESB

BESB is a 118 year-old agency that provides services to blind residents of Connecticut from birth to death. I am an Education Consultant in Children's Services at BESB. Previously I worked with blind adults and children in Massachusetts where there is no agency that provides lifetime services. In Massachusetts, it is up to the individual school districts to hire their own Teachers of Visually Impaired Students (TVIs) and Orientation and Mobility (O&M) Instructors. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), TVI and O&M services are required if found to be necessary for a child's educational success. However, because of the low incidence of blindness and visual impairment, many school districts in Massachusetts struggle to serve students. Students often wait to begin receiving braille instruction, their primary means of reading and writing! They often wait, or are unaware of, the availability of orientation and mobility services, through which they receive the skills to travel independently. My fear is that this bill is the first step toward school districts fending for themselves. It would be a great shame for Connecticut to break up an agency that provides direct services to students with visual impairments in any school district, urban or rural, in order to save an amount of money that is a pittance compared to the overall budget deficit. Under the current model, the difficult transition from school to adult life is efficiently supported by dedicated professionals all working and sharing expertise within the same agency. When considering the splitting of adult and children's services and the redundancies this will create, it is unclear that breaking up the agency will result in any savings at all. Please consider the negative impact of splitting BESB on the blind residents of Connecticut. I do not make this plea in fear of my own job. I ask you to consider the negative and irreversible consequences of breaking up an efficient model of service that is best for the blind residents of Connecticut for the duration of their lives.

David Ferland, M.Ed.

Education Consultant- Orientation and Mobility

Children's Services, Board of Education and Services for the Blind