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Governor's Bill No. 1012
To the Human Services Committee:

We are testifying today to object to the Senate Bill #1012 and show our support for keeping the Board of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) as a separate agency focused solely on serving the blind community in Connecticut. Visual impairment is a low incidence disability although if you look at our family you wouldn't know it. We are a family with 2 children with visual impairments and BESB has become an integral and much needed part of our lives. Visual impairment is a disability which has so many specialized needs that are hard to understand because visual impairment impacts learning so drastically. BESB has been a resource for our family and has been able to streamline services for our children without interruption. The proposed splitting of the agency would cause our children to be covered by 2 different agencies creating confusion and inconvenience. Having the services under agencies that do not understand and have no experience in blindness related issues will cause their services to be inadequate and put our children's future in jeopardy. A commissioner of one of these agencies will find it difficult to understand the importance of the blindness and related services and it is our fear that they may cut them at the state level.

Blindness and visual impairment can be isolating for an individual. Even in the special education community we are isolated, our children have very different educational needs than most other disabilities. Most educational strategies rely heavily on visual aides to help teach concepts. Our children's education will suffer without a separate agency and specifically trained staff who understand and teach these alternative strategies not only to our children but to the local educational team that is involved with their direct instruction. Additionally, BESB needs to be kept as a stand alone agency to maintain the level of understanding necessary to create and direct policy that is essential to the blind population of CT.

Even as parents who have dealt with the needs of visually impaired children for 18 years, we are continually learning and need the expertise of the many individuals from BESB. We have 2 children with different visual disabilities and their needs are different so our learning has had to be expanded to account for the many individual skills they need to learn. BESB continues to offer us insight into the impact that visual impairment has throughout a person's life. BESB's stand alone agency is successful, and has been recognized as such by individuals involved with blind children across the country.

When our younger son, Kevin, who is 12 years old and has been blind since birth, was a baby a teacher of the visually impaired came to our house every week to work with him and us. She was a wealth of information, and was able to tell us how blind adults functioned and this gave us hope for his future. One of the first things she commented to

Kevin was “I can see everyone has been handing you toys,” who knew...you shouldn't hand a blind baby a toy. In order for our son to develop as a competent blind individual he needed to be challenged in ways that a sighted child is naturally. They can see a toy out of their reach and try to get to it. We needed to put the toy in different places, touching him, so he could reach and find it otherwise he would grow up thinking things appear magically in front of him. He needed to learn that the toys had a place and he could go and find them to play. Also, when he was starting to pull up to standing, his orientation and mobility instructor suggested we not speed this up because he would only get this picture of the world (from crawling) now and once he was on his feet he probably would not get this view of the world again, who knew...you shouldn't urge a blind baby to walk sooner. When the visual rehabilitation therapist asked at a parent workshop a few years ago, who is still cutting up their children's food, my hand went up along with others, her response, “stop.”... who knew how important this is, we thought we were helping. I'll tell you who knew, the highly trained and experienced individuals who make up BESB and make it the strong successful agency it is today. We have had to change our thinking and our actions. It took time and the ongoing support of our teachers of the visually impaired, rehabilitation therapists and orientation & mobility instructors over the years. We do okay, but each developmental level often requires new skills and more instruction. Because the BESB educators who work with our children have access to the individuals who work with blind adults they can use their experience to help plan what skills our children will need as adults and how to teach them. Each new school year means a new team of teachers who are unfamiliar with our children and the impact of blindness on their education. Often the BESB team members are the ones who are consistent from year to year and can offer some continuity in his education.

Our younger son Kevin has been blind since birth and is a Braille reader. He is currently in 6th grade in a public school in Newtown with support from a teacher of the visually impaired and an orientation and mobility instructor, both from BESB. His needs are very specialized and necessitate instruction from highly trained educators in Braille, assistive technology, orientation and mobility skills, daily living skills, social skills, and recreation skills. BESB has worked hard to offer many programs for visually impaired children in order to address these specialized areas of instruction known as the expanded core curriculum for blind and visually impaired students. These programs give the children an opportunity to be with visually impaired peers who are experiencing the same issues. Blindness can be quite isolating when a child is surrounded by sighted peers. Instruction in the expanded core curriculum is critical to a blind child's wellbeing. Having the BESB professionals in one agency assures communication between them. Our concerns and questions of how Kevin will do things as an adult are answered because his teacher of the visually impaired has access to the individuals that work with adults.

Joseph, 20 years old, the older of our two sons, has low vision and his needs were not as extensive when he was younger but as he got closer to transition age those needs grew. He is having success in college due to BESB staff having knowledge of him and working hard on his transition. His transition from high school to college was an extremely difficult time; he had many supports in place in high school that were no longer in place at the college level. In order to be successful at the college level a student must advocate

for himself to ensure that those supports get in place. Advocating for oneself is a skill that requires much practice and encouragement from those involved. For Joseph, an intensive transition program was needed and was facilitated by his vocational rehabilitation counselor and teacher of the visually impaired from BESB, who knew Joseph and his strengths and weaknesses. At such a vulnerable time in his life a switch to a new agency and new unfamiliar people would have set him back and possibly ended his college hopes.

As parents of two blind children who have benefitted from BESB services we are in the position to be able to evaluate potential difficulties that would develop if the split were allowed.

Duplicity of resources – Blind individuals require much assistance, including Braille printing, technology services, Braille instruction, orientation and mobility instruction, transition to college services, transition to work services, support of athletic programs and others. They are now adequately addressed under one service provider but would require additional personnel and equipment if divided.

Additional bureaucracy – specifically at the critical time of life when transition from secondary school to college or to the workforce occurs. This is currently seamless and efficient but will produce another unnecessary layer of bureaucracy if the agency is split between 2 departments.

Potential for diminished services – the agency already lost positions and may have additional cuts. Transfer of the split agency to 2 existing large departments with individuals without visual impairment knowledge in a position of power will most likely result in a diluted service with funding being absorbed into the larger pot. The savings implied in the reorganization are miniscule compared to the disruption and potential lack of services to children and adults that can ultimately affect them for a lifetime. Putting the teachers of the visually impaired under State Department of Education seems like a short sighted plan. This agency does not provide direct services or have any knowledge of the specialized educational needs of children who are blind. They are not prepared to implement the kind of programming BESB client's need. It is a conflict of interest since they are involved with evaluating and monitoring educational programs not offering direct services. Our fear is that the State Department of Education would simply give the money to towns and do away with state services. Towns are not in a position to hire their own teachers for 1 or 2 students (Newtown at this time has only 2 blind students) which will likely result in no services to children, our children, who need so much specialized instruction. Although the intent might not be to impact services, the result will.

The current BESB structure allows for a continuum of care throughout a person's life. This continuum will be lost if the agency is split. Division of the current BESB agency into 2 separate departments is unlikely to result in cost savings, increased efficiency or streamlining. The blind community, being unique, requires a strengthening of the current system, not division and reduction.

Thank you for your consideration.
Laurie and Rich Eckler