

## **TESTIMONY**

### **Human Services Committee**

**March 15, 2011**

### **RE: Opposition to HB: 6380 and SB 1012 Consolidation of Board of Education & Services for the Blind**

Good Afternoon: My name is Patrick Johnson and I am President of the CT Institute for the Blind Inc. which does business as Oak Hill. I am also a member of the BESB. I have two brothers in law who are totally blind and developmentally disabled. One is also autistic with severe intellectual impairment. BESB has been a source of support and expertise for my wife's family since these men, now in their sixties, were children. We have also seen the important interface between BESB and Oak Hill (the CT. Institute for the Blind Inc.).

BESB and Oak Hill (CIB Inc) were founded the same year (1898) 118 years ago by the same person, Emily Wells Foster, a visionary for blind people, who believed that both the private and public sector had a role to play in providing educational and support services for children and adults who happen to be blind. So for 118 years our two organizations have collaborated with educational programs, support service, assistive technologies, specialized services for people who are both blind and deaf, mentoring programs, vocational rehabilitation, jobs, job readiness, life skills, and summer camps.

There is a reason why 24 of the fifty states still have free standing public agencies addressing the vital needs of people disabled by blindness. To destroy BESB now would be a mistake. Imagine for a moment that you are blind and you need help. One call the BESB brings you that help with a staff trained to respond and a real live person at the reception desk. Imagine now trying to get that same help from a huge bureaucracy where blind services are a drop in the bucket of this huge agency where, according to Commissioner Starkowski, case managers now have caseloads of 1,700 people due to understaffing. Imagine now that you are blind and deaf and you need to navigate through a huge bureaucracy for very specialized services. Please pause for a moment and put yourselves in the shoes of those who are blind or blind and deaf. The leading cause of blindness today is diabetes and macular degeneration. Any of us one day may need the services of BESB. For over a century CT has been a leader in services to people who are blind. This legislation will take us a step back toward the 19<sup>th</sup> century where blind people are tucked away and forgotten. Most of my colleagues on the BESB are people with visual impairments themselves or, like myself, have loved ones who are

handicapped by blindness. BESB not only delivers services but is a venue where people who are blind have a real voice and some authority over the services they receive.

The most profound concern is for young people in their teen years transitioning into adulthood, looking at job opportunities, and opportunities for further education. Now adult service staff at BESB work hand in hand with the children's service staff to create a smooth transition. Young people will be lost in bureaucracy and barriers if this merger goes forward. The result will be devastating for their future. If they leave school and are not transitioned into work or further schooling the overwhelming majority will never obtain gainful employment. For young people who are blind this transition is essential for their future as productive citizens who can live independently.

Furthermore I'm not sure where the savings will be because this staff will still need leaders who are experts in services to blind people. Now two sets will be required in two separate departments.

BESB has a large inventory of Braille books and materials as well as assistive technologies. Does that go to DSS or DOE? Does it now need to be replicated in two agencies instead of one? What would this duplication cost as two agencies now staff up to deliver bifurcated services? Neither the DOE nor the DSS have the expertise to take on these very specialized services for a cohort with very unique needs. DSS and DOE staff is overwhelmed with what they have on their plates now. Imagine the cost of training and technology and added staff in those agencies to now accommodate people who are blind. 118 years ago Emily Wells Foster and her colleagues had a vision for those who could not see and brought them and those who are blind and deaf out of a dark and silent world please do not start sending them back there.

Respectfully submitted,

Patrick J. Johnson Jr.

President of Oak Hill ( CT Institute for the Blind Inc.) and member of the BESB

120 Holcomb St.

Hartford, CT. 06112

tel. # 860-769-3801