

## Testimony in Opposition of SB 1012

### AN ACT IMPLEMENTING THE GOVERNOR'S BUDGET RECOMMENDATIONS CONCERNING THE TRANSFER OF FUNCTIONS FROM THE BOARD OF EDUCATION AND SERVICES FOR THE BLIND AND THE COMMISSION ON THE DEAF AND HEARING IMPAIRED TO THE DEPARTMENTS OF EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SERVICES.

I am a currently member of the Board of Directors of BESB, as well as an ongoing recipient of BESB services. From 1978 through 2003, I was a BESB employee.

I appreciate the claim that the proposed change may save the state about \$300,000 (0.009% of the estimated state budget deficit). Apparently the proposed cost savings derives from the reduction in personnel of 4 positions, which amounts to about \$288,000 in savings (after federal offsetting monies are lost).

However, I am extremely concerned about breaking up BESB, an agency that provides a continuum of critical services to both adults and children with an efficiency and effectiveness unmatched elsewhere in state government. I do not believe that splitting BESB into parts that are transferred to other government departments will save any dollars, but rather that it will increase costs for this population, not to mention the direct non-pecuniary costs to clients in their losses of excellent, working programs and services from an expert staff. At a time when the state is trying to streamline government, and prepare its citizens for jobs, I believe that this proposed change will take us in exactly the opposite direction.

- ***Splitting BESB apart will require dividing its resources, resulting in the need to duplicate services, equipment, and personnel.***

At present the agency shares a Braille unit which produces Braille for adults and children; it shares a professional library, specialized equipment and material for the blind, a low vision center, and an assistive technology lab. In addition, special assistants and Braillists do work for multiple divisions. The cost of reproducing these services is huge. For example, the cost alone for a new Braille embosser currently used by the agency is \$50,000. This is just one of multiple expenses. The Low Vision Center is filled with Closed Circuit TVs and adaptive equipment. One CCTV can run \$3000 while specialized software costs around \$1000. Braille note takers cost approximately \$6000. To set up two locations with this equipment and hire the personnel to support it will cost far more than what is projected to be saved.

As a single entity, BESB staff is able to communicate and coordinate services on the spot, in-house, within one agency, to share information and to ensure the most effective transitions and referrals for clients. This efficient agency operation optimizes the agency's productivity and guarantees that clients not only benefit from the services but also feel comfortable in seeking services and confident in a high quality of services.

- ***Splitting BESB apart will result in reduced programming for its clients, potentially eliminating children's services and greatly reducing adult services.***

BESB is well known for its ability to work together across divisions to create high quality programs for clients, parents, teachers, paraprofessionals and other district personnel. Programs currently focus on, but are not limited to, the following areas: parents of children with special needs, vocational preparation, technology use, 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, deaf-blind and multiple disability training, as well as others. BESB houses numerous training programs within their facility; with the new model it will not only lose expertise for these events, it will lose the training facilities as well.

**Children Services.** Transferring the teachers to SDE is a short term plan. SDE traditionally has not provided direct services and has little knowledge of the education of children, who are Blind, Deaf Blind or have Multiple Disabilities. In fact, BESB's mission and services are in conflict with SDE's

mission of evaluating and monitoring, not administering, educational programs. SDE is not prepared to implement the kind of programming that BESB client's need. It is a conflict of interest.

Moreover, the last time this transfer was proposed, SDE proposed giving the money to towns and doing away with state services for children – a likely scenario again. Currently there is only a temporary commissioner of the SDE; no one even knows who will be running the Department. The implications of this are frightening to the BESB families and will cost the 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 and 6 or more in the next, and so this transfer will likely result in no services. Although the intent might not be to impact services adversely, the result will.

Note that when the children were mainstreamed in the 1990s, they were transferred from Oak Hill School for the Blind to local public schools. This resulted in the children not receiving Braille skills or the ability to practice their daily living skills.

SDE will be responsible for managing a group of highly trained teachers without the managerial knowledge or expertise in blindness; they have little or no knowledge or understanding of the Expanded Core Curriculum for the blind that is mandated by IDEA. Also lost will be the consolidated client data.

There will also be a cost of integrating Children Services database with SDE.

Regarding CS, the Continuum of services, right now the transition of services from CS to VR, Vocational Rehabilitation, is so smooth that probably most children and parents barely realize its happening! VR gets a bit involved when the student is 14. Contact between the Teacher of the Visually Impaired and the Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor is so important – for one thing, to be sure that I, as the TVI, am teaching the necessary transition skills.

The two of us working together as a team effort is of critical importance; the VR counselor may pick up on something I had never thought about and, having worked with a student, my picture can be very helpful to the VR counselor to get a head start learning about that student.

**Adult Services:** This is already the smallest division, with the smallest budget (13%), and it has by far the most clients to serve. Seventy percent of persons referred to BESB are over age 60, and, for the next 15 years, this is only going to get worse. The services for seniors will obviously diminish as Adult Services gets swallowed by another agency. A handful of clients may be shuffled to Senior Centers to get a few hours of training, and thousands will sit at home trying to adjust to their fate.

- ***Splitting BESB apart will raise space concerns.***

Will the SDE have storage for the Braille and large print library currently housing 60,000 volumes? How about space for volunteer Brailleists? We also need to think about the 43 current Children's Services staff, the facilities for student programs (use of kitchen facility for teaching ADL) and the facilities for in-service training for district personnel. In addition, consideration of storage of specialized materials for loan to students, as well as space for the professional library must be found.

- ***Splitting BESB apart will affect the purchasing function for Children Services.***

With this division, Children Services would lose their purchasing function as it would go to DSS putting a strain on the SDE's staff. In fact, the purchasing may be eliminated and become the responsibility of the towns.

- ***Splitting BESB apart will harm the Business Enterprise Program.***

How DSS will run this program is an unknown. DSS may ignore any Randolph-Sheppard considerations when opening new facilities, as the blind will just be another handicap to DSS. We also don't know what DSS will do with that new pot of money that comes with BEP, but I am concerned that it may not benefit the blind. In addition, DSS has few staff with hands-on experience in evaluating the needs of BESB clients or in actually providing services.

Statistically speaking, states with independent agencies for the blind have lower competitive job closures than those with an independent agency. In the last 5 years, BESB has been in the top 5 states for closures. So, it's logical to presume closure numbers will diminish under DSS. The reason for this is probably because the deeper you bury something in a bureaucracy, the harder it is for them to get anything done.

- ***Splitting BESB apart will eliminate the BESB Board as a policy-setting body.***

The Board will become an advisory board only, with little ability to positively impact programming or services. BESB will go from the most transparent comprehensive agency serving the blind in the Northeast to a myriad of separate parts within separate departments of government, with little accountability. The parts will exist together but no longer in their current symbiotic, or beneficial, relationship.

A citizen who has a family member who is losing vision, a parent who has a baby born blind, a school district with a student who qualifies as VI or an individual who has a visual problem can simply pick up the phone and make one call to access many programs and services. Once the agency is divided and each part is incorporated into a larger government department, client access and support will become cumbersome at best and ineffective at worst. Putting layers of bureaucracy between a client and a department is not the direction in which we want to force deaf, deaf-blind, or multiply-handicapped people to go.

As you can see, I'm very worried about the future of Connecticut's blind, deaf-blind and multiply-handicapped population. At present BESB is a centralized center where constituents can receive all services from birth to death, with smooth transitions from one age group to the next. With such a low-incidence population needing its services, this is the most cost effective, transparent model.

Sincerely,

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