Human Resources Committee Hearing on SB #1012
Tuesday, March 15, 2011

Chairs and Members of the Human Services committee, thank you for allowing me to speak to you about my strong disagreement with SB #1012 recommending the elimination and division of BESB.

At the end of these hearings, imagine driving down your driveway and seeing the carefully groomed hedge of evergreens you planted. In your driveway you see a potted rose bush -you won a raffle at the local garden center. But your landscaping is complete, you have nowhere to put it and it just doesn't blend in. You plant it at the end of evergreens. But you don't have the time or interest and it doesn't get the care it needs. Within a year it is dead.

If you put BESB in with other agencies, it too will die. Perhaps it will be a slow death but all of the programs and services so carefully created to meet the needs of our clients will be gone.

I am a 31 year employee of BESB. As a teacher of students with visual impairments, I have a long history with this agency. I have been part of 3 similar attempts to dismantle or dissect BESB. Past legislative bodies have looked into this. Each time this issue has come before the state, it has been declared a bad idea. I ask you to look at and learn from the past, to recognize that this issue has been considered and rejected for many legitimate reasons that hold true today. Please put this idea to rest for good.

The blind and visually impaired are a low incidence population. There must be leadership with expertise to make the crucial decisions necessary in these difficult times. Commissioners whose interests are divided will not understand the issues facing this group and will not be able to serve their needs.

Did you know that all of the BESB divisions work together to create career days, work experience opportunities, daily living skill programs, low vision centers, technology preparation classes, sports programs, and transition experiences? That they have developed programs for parents, teachers, OTs, PTs and PE teachers and paraprofessionals? In addition as a group they offer CEU trainings, deafblind and multiple disabilities training as well? That in a coordinated effort, clients' orientation and mobility needs are addressed to ensure a smooth transition from school to work? And that without these combined and highly coordinated efforts our clients will have fewer opportunities throughout their lives?

With the model proposed, not only will we lose expertise for these events, we will also lose centralized, established and equipped training facilities and resources as well. In order to implement the proposed model, the two new commissioners will need to newly acquire the very knowledge and expertise that is now in place and resides in a mature well-functioning agency. They will need to run and coordinate divided programs. It will be time and cost ineffective. At best, the results will be diluted and weakened.

On paper, it looks like BESB will simply be divided and the parts assimilated into other agencies. The proposed cost savings is that of 4 personnel at the administrative level. With

supportive federal dollars, this savings is reduced further. In fact, there will be no cost savings in the act of dividing the agency into two groups. In addition, the division will cost the state more.

By splitting the agency into two parts, you will have to divide up its resources, resulting in the need to duplicate services, equipment and personnel. Right now 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, just the cost alone for a new braille embosser that is 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 both locations with this equipment and hire the personnel to support it will cost far more than what is projected to be saved.

Putting the teachers under SDE can only be a short term plan; leaving an uncertain future for services to the children we serve. This is an agency that does not provide direct services. Their job is to support general education curriculum, research, planning, evaluation, assessment and data analyses. The staff there has no knowledge or expertise in the education of children who are blind. In fact our services are in conflict with what they do. They are not prepared to implement the kind of programing our clients need, nor do they understand why our programing is set up as it is. The last time this was proposed, the SDE came out and said they would simply give the money to towns and do away with state services- 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 our families and will cost the towns much more in the long run. Although the intent might not be to impact services, the result certainly will.

Another concern that arises with this consolidation is one of space. Will the SDE have storage for the Braille and large print library currently housing 60,000 volumes? How about space for volunteer braillists? 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.
With this consolidation, Children Services would lose their purchasing function (and the expertise that goes with purchasing the specialized items) as the purchasing department would go to DSS, putting a strain on the SDE's staff. The SDE will also be responsible for managing a group of highly trained teachers despite their lack of managerial knowledge or expertise in blindness-the SDE staff have little or no knowledge or understanding of the Expanded Core Curriculum for the blind mandated by IDEA. Also lost will be the consolidated client data. There will also be a cost of integrating Children Services database with SDE.

BESB is a centralized center where constituents can receive all services from birth to death. With such a low incidence population, this is the most cost effective model. Asking towns to take this over when they might have but one student this year and 4 the next is unmanageable

and cost ineffective. Because it is a low-incidence disability, blindness cannot be administered in the same way that other disabilities are. The costs to educate a child with blindness are huge. The needs of our clients are unique and by having centralized services we are able to provide for them in a cost effective service delivery model that works. No cost savings or program improvement would result from the proposed changes.

In Connecticut, all students with visual impairments receive services. In other states, students often sit in their districts without teachers. The low incidence of this population makes it difficult for towns to find qualified teachers, resulting in the lack of services. The model here in CT makes sure all students have access to a TVI. Once you start dismantling the foundation of CT services, this is a likely scenario here as well.

I have personally seen the successes this agency has facilitated. Just this past December, a student who was born premature and without any vision, graduated with a law degree. She received agency support from children services, adult services and vocational rehabilitation. Due to this coordinated programing she can now become an independent, self-supporting tax payer.

A constituent who has a family member who is losing vision, a parent who has a baby born blind, a district with a newly diagnosed child, or an individual who has a visual impairment can simply pick up the phone and make one call to talk to many service delivery persons. Once divided and incorporated into a larger agency the process of obtaining services and connecting with the correct person will become cumbersome. Reaching the head of the agency will no longer be a simple task, layers of bureaucracy will stand in the way, and once located, that person will know little about the needs of a person with blindness.

In my 31 years, I have witnessed BESB become more financially efficient, more accountable and more highly responsive to their clients' needs. Keeping all parts of this agency together as one is the only logical choice you can make to meet the needs of your blind constituents.

Thank you for attention to this matter.
Please vote against SB #1012 and leave BESB as a stand-alone agency.

Cheryl Brown