

Testimony for Public Hearing on
Senate Bill #1012

Chairs and members of the Human Services Committee, thank you for this opportunity to speak to you this morning.

My name is Karen Olson and I am a teacher of the Visually-Impaired employed by the Board of Education & Services for the Blind (BESB) for the past 18 years. I am also a Unit Coordinator for Special Services, a small group of teachers specializing in working with children with multiple disabilities including those with deafblindness.

I am here to voice my opposition to Senate Bill #1012 which would divide our agency between the Department of Education and the Department of Social Services. For nearly 120 years, BESB has been an easily identifiable stand-alone agency providing services to the blind, visually impaired and deafblind communities from birth to death. Essentially a "one-stop" point of entry for families and individuals seeking services. The current structure which includes the divisions of Children's Services, Adult Services, Vocational Rehab, and Business Enterprises has allowed for seamless delivery of services to our clients and their families. We share resources (most notably a Braille and large print library, a low vision center, an assistive technology lab, and a professional library). And more importantly we share our professional expertise on a daily basis and collaborate on numerous programs and trainings for our children and their parents and our adult clients. This small but lean agency has been led for the past 8 years by a person who has years of experience working with the blind, who knows our challenges and works to maintain high quality services even in the light of budget cuts.

So what are my concerns? First, I can certainly understand the current fiscal situation and the need for everyone to do their part. But if this is an effort to save money, it won't. And I believe our agency can and will effectively be able to find the same amount of money that the state believes it would save by splitting our agency.

Secondly, if this is an effort to "streamline" state services, it won't. Streamlining services would be keeping everyone under the same roof, directed by a person with knowledge and experience in the field so that we can work effectively together to maximize our shared resources and deliver coordinated services in the most efficient and cost-effective way. In talking with my colleagues in other states where there are no centralized agencies for the blind, but rather dispersed under a variety of organizations, services are "catch as catch can" with families and school districts struggling to not only understand their students' basic needs, but to then find appropriate personnel to deliver those services. Children are left without the services they need to be adequately educated for months into years.

Thirdly, if we are divided we can easily become "lost" in an agency whose attentions are divided across many different social services. BESB is easily identifiable as an agency with a single focus. Individuals who lose their vision, or parents who have a child diagnosed with a vision loss can quickly find us and we are able to respond to their needs almost immediately. If we are but a small part of a large agency how long will it take for people to find us and get the services they need? Additionally, as part of a large agency, we will be led, most likely, by people who do not understand our services and their importance to this community. I fear that we will become just one more social

service that people will have to “line up” for, placed on a waiting list or have someone only show up once a year at a PPT meeting.

My final concern is the difference in focus between the State Department of Education which is more of an oversight agency, and the direct service model of BESB’s Children’s Services. The State Department’s model does not include direct services. Although SB #1012 maintains the personnel of Children’s Services as it transitions to SDE, how long will it be before it decides it can no longer sustain these direct services?.... that this is not what they do, nor what their mission is. Can we guarantee to families and individuals that there will be services a few years from now? Or will the funding and responsibility go back to the school districts as is the ineffective model in so many other states? For such a low incidence population, will towns be able to secure the professional personnel they’ll need to educate perhaps only 1 or 2 children? Will they be willing to purchase a large print book that may cost \$900 but not be used again? Whereas BESB is the common ground among many districts and we are able to share our resources among students, the towns would be on their own to figure out what is needed and to then secure the services, materials and supplies necessary. By dividing our agency, I am afraid it will be a slippery slope from an ideal model of services which exists now to one that will ultimately cost more money and offer less than adequate services to our students.

I ask the committee to consider these points and vote against SB #1012.
Thank you for your time and attention.

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