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Testimony

**TO: Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee, Connecticut State
General Assembly**

RE: Transitional Services for Youth and Young Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder

DATE: Wednesday September 24, 2014

AUTHOR: Helen Bosch, Executive Director, Vista Vocational & Life Skills Center

Vista provides services and training to help individuals with autism and related disabilities transition from high school settings into successful and independent adulthood. Additionally, Vista provides services that can continue this process throughout the lifetime of these adults as they age and their needs evolve. The goal is, always, to offer opportunities for achievement, as much independence as is feasible, and possibility of personal success – however that is defined.

It is our observation throughout Vista's 25 year history, that transition services are essential to the success of an individual with ASD. For any young adult, the need to slowly move into more independent settings is crucial. Hence, college dormitories are often the first step towards this greater independence. For individuals with ASD, this need is magnified substantially. While individuals with ASD have varying needs, there are some transition elements which are universal:

- 1) The need for good functional transition assessment while still in high school. While the path that each individual may take after high school is distinct, there are some important factors which may impact success. The State of Connecticut has created a list of Transition Core Standards that are useful in identifying those factors. Each student should have functional assessment reflecting those Transition Core Standards. Items such as activities of daily living, social awareness and judgment, employment readiness, executive function and ability to generalize learning are key components whether one's path is college, transitional programming or community supportive living. Academic or psycho-educational assessments alone are not sufficient to meet the complex needs of individuals with ASD. The willingness of school systems to invest in these comprehensive assessments is the first step toward appropriate service delivery during the transition years.

- 2) Adequate transition funding and continued funding after 21. Young adults with ASD are in need of long term funding that often, can diminish throughout the years. In Vista's historic observation, intensive training and support in the early years can help the individual develop the skills needed to become much more independent, thus needing less intensive, if any, supports in the later years. This model however, does not mean short term funding and then no funding. This model requires a graduated approach to service provision. A comprehensive program initially that offers holistic services such as Life Skills Training, OT or PT services, ABA, Vocational Training, Academic Preparation, and Social Skills Training can prepare a young adult to need fewer services later. It is a cost efficient model that has been extremely successful at Vista. We serve almost 300 individuals many of whom have received 1-3 years of intensive services and, as a result, have gone on to independent living with a need for significantly reduced services. Additionally, these individuals are now active members of the local community, engaged and included in the fabric of the society with friends and lead a full productive life.

- 3) View Transition as a multiyear process that continues after age 21. Approximately half of the individuals that Vista supports live with ASD. Of that group, approximately 50% do not qualify for funding through the traditional DDS system, but DO qualify for funding through DDS' Autism Services Division. However, the available long term funding does not begin to meet the numbers of individuals and their families. Although DDS has established the expectation of funding for those living with ASD, the reality of the funding is so limited as to leave individuals and their families on a prohibitively long waiting list...of years. With no accessible funding on the horizon, individuals with ASD live with their families, with little to no work and few social programs. In essence DDS' autism spectrum services program is established in name only. The low level of funding leaves individuals- and their families- without the ongoing training they need- and clearly benefit from. Thus, even if there are excellent transition programs, young adults with ASD fall off the proverbial special education cliff when they hit age 21. This can be changed by adequately funding the Autism services programs at the state level. Only with adequate funding can there be true transition for this population which is only growing in size and scope. Additionally, it is smart economics. Providing levels of funding to maintain independence and success prevents greater funding in group homes, skilled nursing environments or other options which may be necessary as these young adults age.

Thank you for your time and attention on this crucial issue. Vista is prepared and energized to assist in any way to ease the way for these young adults in productive and successful adulthood.

Helen Bosch, Executive Director
September 24, 2014