

I say NO to closing Southbury Training School,

March 16, 2015

My name is David Gerstenmaier and my brother Craig has been a resident at STS for almost 60 years. Craig is severely disabled and cannot speak, so I will speak on his behalf. Sadly he is one of the more high functioning residents, the others being confined to wheel chairs, blindness or other debilitating disabilities. It is quite simply the most severe cases imaginable.

His cottage was recently renovated as part of a consolidation project and is modern, clean, warm, comfortable and on a beautiful piece of property. While our family has continued to visit my brother regularly, most of the other residents families have long since abandoned them, moved away or are no longer living. The staff at STS is the only family most of the residents have and they are amazing, wonderfully skilled caregivers. Having worked in a Connecticut group home during college, I believe it is wonderful to integrate high functioning I/DD into the community. I can tell you that this is not the case with severe I/DD. The residents of STS require advanced care that CANNOT be provided in a Group Home. Their needs are too great. Uprooting these residents from the only home they have ever known, at this stage in their lives, for what a Council deems is "best for them" is both cruel and irresponsible.

Craig has battled pneumonia several times over the past few years and I am convinced that without the staffing and facilities that STS provides he would not have survived. He is currently back at STS recovering from two weeks in the Danbury Hospital ICU. During his time in the hospital, many of the STS staff members visited Craig during their free time, while others volunteered for the overnight rounds to remain by his side. While Craig cannot speak, his actions spoke louder than words. During his most desperate times, and in the presence of his family, it was his longtime caregivers whom he reached out to for comfort. It struck me during this time that they are more his family than we could ever be. My family will forever be grateful to everyone at STS for their unconditional love and the incredible care they have given my brother.

Connecticut has already proven that it can't manage its own money, so eliminating a school that has provided so much value to taxpayers in need seems a convenient target for this misguided State. Particularly given there are 2,000 needy families who have been waiting as long as 20 years for a place to call home. Everything is already in place to provide them with an environment where residents can take a bus to school or work, bbq's during the summer, participate in community events and simply live their lives with the ultimate in personal care. Curiously, acquiring and customizing 100's of private homes and hiring staff members is a more timely and cost effective than using what already exists? If Southbury is fully populated it is not possible for Group Homes to be a lower cost per resident. A Group Home solution will likely result in many more years of waiting for these poor families rather than an immediate solution to their needs.

I would encourage all I/DD Caucus members to visit Craig's cottage before making the claim that a Group Home can care for these individuals. Also, Mr. Bolinsky's reference to STS as a "less dignified, warehouse-like setting that provide fewer opportunities for personal fulfillment and personalized, engaged care." Seriously?? Warehouse like setting? Lacking personalized, engaged care? What an obnoxious slap in the face to the hardworking employees at STS who ACTUALLY CARE about making a difference in these people's lives. Having spent over 40 years frequently visiting STS, I would best describe it as a Campus of Compassion set in the beautiful rolling hills of Northwestern, CT. STS is the

Gold Standard for severe I/DD care. It simply needs a makeover and to be put in the hands of people that truly understand the needs of the Developmentally Disabled. While my brother may not make it to the year 2020, future generations of Connecticut families should be allowed to cherish this incredible school. I can only imagine what life would have been like for my family had STS not existed.

Respectfully,

David Gerstenmaier