January 20, 2022

Dear Representative Exum,

I am blind and live in West Hartford. I, and fellow members of the National Federation of the Blind throughout Connecticut, are concerned about the inadequate quality of services that we are receiving from the Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB). We ask you to take on oversight at the upcoming session and direct BESB to fix the following problems:

1. The Department of Rehabilitation Services (DORS) (under which BESB is housed) has just hired an interim Director, Cheryl Cepelak. Cheryl has a background in Human Resources and performance management consulting. She has no experience working with the blind or visually impaired. The department took no action to share a proposed job description with advocates for the blind. Without leadership dedicated to the blind specifically, our unique needs—as job seekers, college students, seniors losing vision, and blind children—cannot be effectively met.
2. BESB is not effectively serving seniors losing vision who need not return to the workforce. Services are limited, and suggestions from blind seniors, such as for group classroom instruction for technology, have been ignored. We are concerned that BESB is not using Federal dollars specifically earmarked to serve blind seniors. Please ask the commissioner of DORS to account for this failure to use Federal dollars or to spend them appropriately.
3. Blind children under the age of fourteen are not receiving services from BESB following best practices such as those followed in New Jersey (which starts at infancy). Please ask the commissioner of DORS to report on how its services for blind children align with those in other states.
4. Information provided by BESB on client satisfaction is shockingly biased. Satisfaction surveys are only taken from clients that have been placed in jobs; in the last survey, this was fifty-six clients, but over eight hundred are on BESB’s books to receive services. Many of my fellow members and I did not successful achieve employment from BESB services. No survey was given to clients that were not successful in the vocational rehabilitation program.  This survey cost $19,000. Please demand much greater accountability and accuracy of metrics that clients receive from BESB and DORS management.

Thank you for your consideration of these priority items for the blind of Connecticut

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