

Testimony for 12.06.16 Hearing

By Maria Baroncini

In Advocacy for Rebecca Laube, 45

Resident of Pond View Group Home, Cheshire, CT

My name is Maria Baroncini, and my sister, Rebecca Laube, currently lives in a state-run group home in Cheshire. Becky has cerebral palsy and is intellectually disabled. She is funny and smart. She is beautiful and strong. And she's nonverbal. So I thank you for allowing me to be her voice today.

A little over 20 years ago, my sister went to live at what would become her home - Pond View Group Home, under the professional, caring, client-centric, and loving supervision of the group home manager and staff.

I remember very clearly the day we brought Becky to Pond View to begin a new chapter in her life. Both my parents, Cliff & Esther Laube (who are here today), and I drove her out to Cheshire from our hometown of Southbury. The home was clean and organized, the staff friendly, and from all we could see, the professionalism with which the staff carried themselves gave us every reason to believe she would be cared for properly and treated with dignity and respect. Those preconceptions would continue to prove themselves true as the years went by and Becky became a permanent part of this new home: as she became a friend, a family member and a loved one.

But as we drove away that very first day, back to a home with a now-empty bedroom, many of her personal items still filling in little spaces between the walls, and the sound of her laugh still echoing in our hearts, we were scared. We didn't know what the future held for her. For me, as her sister, I was hopeful for a new start for her. For a chance for her to thrive in a setting of 24-hour care with professionals trained to handle behaviors like hers, for staff that would seek to find her hidden talents, her untapped skills, the delightful nuances of her personality that so often hid behind her aggressive outbursts.

For my parents, it was a completely different story. With this decision, Becky now became ward of the state. At the time I couldn't fully comprehend that piece. Now, as a parent, it tears at my heart to think of the sacrifice my parents had to make. To give up care and custody of a child because it was – without question – the best thing they could do for their daughter.

The evening after we dropped Becky off at Pond View, I was sweeping the floor of the kitchen when the broom hit something. It was the stack of magazines Becky kept by the kitchen table.

The ones she would flip through every day without fail. And it suddenly hit me: she doesn't live here anymore. No more coming home to find her laughing at a funny picture she saw. No more lying next to her on Sunday mornings while she was waking up, singing all of the church folk songs I could think of (not well mind you), stopping only to try to think of more, as Becky tapped my arm and signed the word "more" over and over again.

The memory of that first day isn't one I love to live in, but it's one that needs to be heard. We need you to go back with us to that day. Because that is where we are asked to go again. Back not only to a looming sense of potential loss, but back to the unknown and the fear. It goes beyond wondering if her basic needs will be met, although that is certainly a concern: bathing, grooming, eating, toileting, healthcare. It's more than that. Will she be understood? Will they know when she is sick? Hurting? Will they hurt her? Will they ignore her? Will they know that when she tightens her fists and shakes them in front of her that she's actually not showing any sign of aggression – that she's actually signing? That her spastic movements from her cerebral palsy limit her to using the same sign to mean milk, cow, cold, drive and scared? If she's signing that she's scared, will they know the difference?

To go through that once was enough. Now, after seeing her thrive in a home, with people who know her, people she has come to trust, in a home she loves, with residents and staff who ARE family, we are faced with the same fears and concerns for her well-being, safety and quality of life that we faced 20 years ago. 20 years ago – when we entrusted her care to the state. Trusting that they would always care for her. That they wouldn't leave her behind. That they would see to it that she DID have a home. Not a residence. Not a placement. A home.

In cases of child custody decisions, the state holds itself to certain standards – that above all else, the best interest of the child comes first. This is obviously not the same situation. This is not a custody battle. But the state has clearly laid out what constitutes "best interest" of a party who cannot speak for themselves. Of a party who needs to be protected. According to the 2015 Connecticut General Statute 46b-56 (c), "the court shall consider the best interests of the child, and doing so may consider, but shall not be limited to, one or more of the following factors..." It goes on to list 16 statutory factors that can be considered. Obviously quite a few do not apply to the purposes of my argument. But among them are factors that ring very true to our current situation with regard to moving our loved ones out of their current environment, including three that I find very pertinent. In hearing these, please keep in mind that the wording is designed around a child custody case. For all intents and purposes today, and as many of us have come to know to be true, housemates have become siblings, and the staff have become parents and caregivers. The three factors in this General Statute that should be pointed out are as follows:

Statutory Factor #5: "The past and current interaction and relationship of the child with each parent, the child's siblings and any other person who may significantly affect the best interest of the child:"

Statutory Factor #9: “The child’s adjustment to his or her home, school or community environments”

Statutory Factor #10: “The length of time that the child has lived in a stable and satisfactory environment and the desirability of maintaining continuity in such environment...”

In my opinion therefore, as the state protects the best interest of a child that comes before them, so should the state protect the best interest of the developmentally disabled.

To risk them losing their current families: their co-residents who have become like siblings, and their staff who have become parent figures would NOT be in their best interest. To do so, would set them back years in adjustment and emotional and physical stability. To do so would cause a disruption in their lives so great, it would take – in cases like my sister’s – years to repair. To do so, would be to knowingly and willingly risk the break-up – both physically and emotionally – of a family.

I am not naïve to the plight of the state of Connecticut’s economy. I read the 5-year plan. And I understand the potential cost savings in relation to privatization.

But no matter the outcome: whether it is decided to keep my sister in her home, or hand her over to an unknown private agency, Becky’s safety and well-being must be protected. Should it come to privatization, we need to know that the staff coming in will be qualified, that the agency coming in will be equipped to give my sister the best care possible. We need to know what hourly wage the home will be put out to bid for. We need to be assured that if the disastrous decision is made to hand over their care to an entirely new entity, that these homes will be put out to bid in a manner that will attract trained, experienced staff who will WANT to stay for the long haul. Staff who CAN because they can make a living by doing so. Who will be dedicated to their jobs and to the people they care for, because they will be compensated accordingly.

The best interest of those we love must be protected. Those who cannot speak for themselves. The best interest of those who are so often forgotten, so often looked over, and who need to be protected. It is simple really: it is their RIGHT.

Thank you.