



Testimony of Gerardo Benavides
Disability Outreach Assistance Specialist

before the

Baltimore City Council:
Labor Committee

on

Council Bill 17-0018: Labor and Employment – City Minimum Wage

March 1, 2017
Council Chambers, City Hall
Baltimore, Maryland

Good evening Council President Young, Chair Sneed, and members of the Committee. My name is Gerardo Benavides and I am a Disability Outreach Assistance Specialist at Health Care for the Homeless; I am a social worker who specializes in assisting clients apply for and access federal disability benefits. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

Health Care for the Homeless is a non-profit, federally qualified health center that works to prevent and end the cycle of homelessness for vulnerable individuals and families. We provide quality, integrated health care and promote access to affordable housing and sustainable incomes through direct service, advocacy and community engagement.

I am here today to voice agency support for Council Bill 17-0018. Imagine managing your diabetes...caring for your family or healing from trauma on the streets, with no or minimal income. It is unimaginable. Impossible, even. A low minimum wage leads to instability in every facet of a person's life, including housing. Housing is health care. And access to a fair minimum wage gives our clients, and all Baltimore residents, the access to better health and builds a better Baltimore.

My job requires that I conduct weekly outreach at the Weinberg Housing and Resource Center on the border between Mt. Vernon and Downtown, where I engage with shelter residents and their case management providers. During this work, I come across individuals who are only in the shelter because they cannot pay or save up for long-term housing to stay out of the shelter; they work jobs with dismal wages, or are challenged to find a well-paying one. This struggle keeps them in shelters, on the streets, and reliant on services that they know they would not need if they were paid a higher minimum wage. These are the individuals caught in-between the margins; *Baltimore's economy is better, not worse, if we increase the minimum wage and afford them the opportunity to live fully.*

I, and my agency, voice support for this bill overall, but do not support the proposal that mentally and physically disabled workers may be authorized payments less than the minimum wage. I specifically work to assist adults dealing with or at-risk of homelessness, and who are diagnosed with a severe mental illness. The individuals who I work with have been referred from providers in local hospitals, outreach centers, shelters, and state and county correctional facilities. Many of my clients voice a genuine desire to stabilize their employment and health, in order to get off public benefits. Proposing that minimum wage payments can be less for mentally and physically disabled workers puts them at a severe disadvantage; it discriminates against them, and amplifies the stigmas that they deal with daily, which undervalue them as productive members of our society. Furthermore, this disincentivizes disabled individuals from seeking employment that might otherwise free them from public benefits.

The importance of a fair minimum wage cannot be overstated. With a higher minimum wage, individuals have greater access to housing and medical services, and the ability to better contribute to our community. If housing is health care, then we must devise solutions that allow for fair access to pay for that housing, including raising the minimum wage. And by raising the minimum wage, we take one more profound and progressive step toward, one day,

eradicating the cycles of homelessness and poverty that exist and dismantling the underlying stigmatization and forms of oppression that support these cycles.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today, and I am happy to answer any questions.