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**TESTIMONY ON HB0093 - POSITION: FAVORABLE**

**Housing and Community Development – Homeless Shelter Certification Program – Establishment**

**TO:** Chair Korman, Vice Chair Boyce, and members of the Environment and Transportation Committee

**FROM:** Gerardo Benavides

**My name is Gerardo Benavides. I am a resident of District 13. I am submitting this testimony in support of HB0093 for the establishment of the Housing Shelter Certification Program.**

My name is Gerardo Benavides and I have organized with communities experiencing homelessness in the past, particularly Housing Our Neighbors (HON) in Baltimore City. While living in Baltimore, I also worked in numerous nonprofits who worked with people experiencing homelessness, with the expressed goal of making housing more attainable for all. I believe that housing is a human right, but also understand that shelters are a critical need in the community as a service and tool across the spectrum of resources to reduce homelessness. In my organizing and professional work, I frequently conducted outreach at shelters to speak to residents and learn more about their experiences. One common theme from these outreach visits was that shelter conditions were deplorable. Particularly around the pandemic, residents of shelters and people on the street frequently told us that the conditions in shelters were inhumane, at worst. People would fall ill, basic resources were not provided and residents were sometimes worried about their own safety. The state needs to develop standards for shelters to protect the rights of shelter residents, building standards to make sure the facilities are up to par to house human beings, and need to be connected in the broader HMIS system to ensure that residents' shelter stay is brief, and so that they can get connected to other services and housing as the ultimate goal.

Working and organizing alongside shelter residents, it was clear that they saw the conditions within city shelters as unfit and inhumane. By instituting a Shelter Certification Program, this would ensure that there are standards that must be upheld for shelters to exist. Shelters should be a place of dignity, and the people who use shelters should be treated with dignity given that, for some, it is a temporary home. Improved shelter conditions and certifying building standards and protecting the rights of residents will also keep more people off of the streets; frequently, I was told by people that they would rather be on the street or on their own than to risk their safety staying in a shelter. Particularly during the coldest and hottest months of the calendar, this can literally save lives; if people feel welcome and dignified using

a shelter, they will be less likely to be on the street, and subsequently less susceptible to environmental and other harms that can befall them living on the street.

Additionally, by ensuring that all shelters participate in the Homeless Management Information System, this ensures that residents will be connected to broader systems and resources that can eventually be their way out of homelessness. The shelter system should be seen as a resource, a temporary step, in an individual's road to being housed.

Thank you for your time. **I respectfully urge this committee to return a favorable report on HB0093.**