

Faith Leaders Statement on Equity & Cannabis Legalization in New York

As New York State moves to fully legalize cannabis by April of 2019, we as clergy, faith leaders, and community leaders feel the moral responsibility to call for justice in how this new industry is regulated.

We simultaneously recognize the healing benefits of cannabis for medical use, while maintaining concerns about its potential abuse for recreational purposes. Our congregations and communities include both people with chronic illnesses who benefit from cannabis treatments, as well as individuals with a history of substance abuse for whom recreational marijuana use would be a stumbling block. Our congregations and communities will need to grapple with these realities in the days ahead as cannabis is fully legalized.

What we *are* united on is the urgent need for economic and racial justice for communities of color that have been targeted by the war on drugs. As New York State moves to legalize what will be a multi-billion dollar industry, we are calling for an equity framework that ensures that the individuals, neighborhoods, and communities who have suffered the most from the criminalization of cannabis receive a proportionate share of the economic benefits of legalization.

We are aware that prohibition of marijuana has racist roots dating back to the 1930s, when the newly formed Federal Bureau of Narcotics announced “the primary reason to outlaw marijuana is its effect on the degenerate races,” specifically, “Negroes, Hispanics and Filipinos.”¹ While government studies show that African-Americans, Latinos, and Whites use marijuana at equal rates² - in fact Whites are slightly *more* likely to use marijuana - enforcement has disproportionately targeted communities of color. In New York City, African-Americans are arrested at eight times the rate of whites, and Latinos are arrested at five times the rate of whites.³ Approximately 86 percent of people arrested for marijuana in New York City are African-American and Latino. The targeting of people of color for these offenses has both deprived people of liberty through incarceration, and limited their economic mobility, as arrest and conviction records bar them from certain employment and business licenses.

With billions of dollars at stake through legalization, it would be a further injustice if the same communities that have lost the most through criminalization were locked out of the economic windfall that is to come. We are calling for an equity framework to ensure that communities of color and formerly incarcerated people aren't left behind once again. Specifically, we are advocating for the following:

¹ <https://fee.org/articles/the-racist-roots-of-marijuana-prohibition/>

² <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/NSDUH-DetTabs-2016/NSDUH-DetTabs-2016.pdf>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/13/nyregion/marijuana-arrests-nyc-race.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article®ion=Footer>

1. **Individuals who have been arrested, convicted and imprisoned for cannabis related offenses should be released and automatically have their convictions vacated.** Those who have been convicted for cannabis related offenses should not only have their records cleared, they deserve pathways to education, employment, ownership, and access to capital, including but not limited to, opportunities to participate in the legal industry.
2. **86% of the tax revenue should be reinvested into historically overcriminalized communities.** To help communities of color repair the harm done from the war on drugs, the tax revenue from the legal industry should be returned to communities at the same rate they were targeted. These funds should not go to law enforcement, but to community-driven initiatives that promote wellness, education, economic opportunities and alternatives to incarceration in neighborhoods harmed by the war on drugs.
3. **Communities harmed by the war on drugs deserve true equity in the legalized industry.** The economic windfall that is coming should not solely benefit large corporations that are looking to extract wealth from our communities. Current operating license holders from the medical marijuana industry should not be given a fast track into the industry before the rest of the community is even at the start line. Community members, specifically formerly incarcerated individuals and people of color, must have equitable access to licenses, business development support, capital for small business ownership, jobs and job training, board and committee positions, and investment opportunities.
4. **Communities of color and low-income communities should have access to the best education, treatment, and wellness supports to promote health and reduce addiction.** While we recognize that marijuana is less harmful and addictive than many legal substances (alcohol, tobacco), we are also keenly aware that poverty and trauma can make members of our community even more vulnerable to substance abuse and addiction. As recreational cannabis use becomes legal, we must ensure that communities have the proper tools to educate youth and other vulnerable populations about the new laws, medical benefits, and dangers of misuse.

We call on New York to put the needs of communities unjustly targeted by the war on drugs at the forefront of the framework for cannabis legalization. As clergy, faith leaders, and community leaders, we will continue to engage our communities on how to deal responsibly with the coming legalization of cannabis. Yet we declare with a united voice that the communities most impacted should be protected through regulation and supported through reinvestment.