

Verbal Testimony for HB 1449

Good Afternoon Chairwoman Pendergass, Vice Chairwoman Pena Melnyk and all members of the Health and Government Operations Committee.

Today, I am here representing Marylanders for a Diverse and Equitable Cannabis Sector to support of HB 1449, as amendment.

Let me be frank.... we need the Maryland General Assembly to act now to ensure that minorities in Maryland have a fair opportunity for Minority and women owned firms to participate in medical cannabis.

The history of cannabis in the State of Maryland has not be fair or equitable to minorities, particularly African Americans. In 2010, Maryland ranked 3rd in the nation among marijuana possession arrest and in many communities like Baltimore City, Worchester County, over 90% of these arrest were African American.

Many of you may think this is “old news’, but the unfair treatment continues. In 2018, Baltimore Fishbowl reported that in the 3 years preceding the decriminalization of marijuana and the legalization of medical cannabis, African Americans still represented more than 90% of arrests.

During this same period, the Maryland Medical Cannabis Commission awarded 15 grower licenses and not one went to a minority-majority owned company.

In this moment of crisis in 2018, the Maryland General Assembly took action and passed HB 2, which created a clear path for Minorities and women to level the playing field for participate in the business of medical cannabis.

Unfortunately, despite the efforts of the Maryland General Assembly’s action, as we sit here today there is still not 1 minority majority owned grower operation in the state of Maryland.

The Medical Cannabis industry was created by the Maryland General Assembly and in 2019 is reported to be a \$96 million industry, just for growers. In short, the current laws has created a boutique industry in which

only 15 firms split almost \$100 million dollars and none of them are minority owned, even though our communities is not only the one most devastated by arrests – still to this day. But also because of health disparities in this state more likely to be impacted by the diseases that can be treated by medical cannabis.

The bad news for minorities continues.

During this same period, former Del. Cheryl Glenn, a leader and a champion on these issues, was indicted. This opened the door for the media to re-hash old scandals and scams in this and related industries. But these things are just a distraction and are not associated with the REAL impact of the current environment Medical Cannabis is having on the minority business community.

We understand that these circumstances make it harder to act, harder to build coalitions and harder to get the commitments to vote... but in the words of the great Nelson Mandela, **“It always seems impossible until it’s done.”**

Today, my colleagues and I are calling on you to GET IT DONE.

As part of our collective testimony, you will hear not only the reasons to support this bill as amended but also the reasons why the Maryland General Assembly must act now and provide MMCC with more guidelines and support to diversify the Maryland Medical Cannabis industry.

In short, MMCC attempted to complete a process that ended in total chaos, confusion and bias. At a time, when the industry is on track to quadruple in revenue. Each day minorities are NOT operating, they are losing their investment as well as their opportunity to fairly compete in the market.

Please don't be distracted by the noise around medical cannabis because at the end of the day this is about creating a level playing field for minorities to operate in a industry created by the Maryland General Assembly. By not stepping in today, you allow marijuana to continue its negative impact on minority communities.

We implore you to listen to all witness, then favorable vote HB1449 out of committee, as amended. We are counting on you to GET IT DONE.

Thank you.

Reference Material and Sources

The state's Medical Marijuana Commission had awarded 15 grower licenses, and none of the organizations are minority-owned.

In 2010, Maryland was listed among the states with the most marijuana possession arrests, with one of the highest fiscal expenditures enforcing possession laws.

After arresting such high numbers for marijuana possession, the state finally decriminalized the drug in 2014. <https://www.civilized.life/articles/history-of-marijuana-in-maryland/>

Industry analysts had predicted the market would gross \$60 million in sales by its third year. But by the end of its first year, in December, purveyors' gross sales surpassed \$96 million. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/md-politics/amid-talk-of-legalization-marylands-medical-cannabis-industry-expands/2019/09/08/a33a1afe-cfee-11e9-8c1c-7c8ee785b855_story.html

Maryland was No. 3 among the states in per-capita arrests for marijuana possession in 2010, the last year for which data are available. Baltimore City had the fifth-highest number of arrests of African-Americans on marijuana possession charges among large counties (or in our case, county equivalents) nationwide — far in excess of what its population would warrant. Nearly 92 percent of those arrested for marijuana possession in the city that year were black. Worcester County, home of Ocean City, had by far the highest marijuana possession arrest rate for all races of any county in the nation with a population of at least 30,000. Baltimore City ranked fifth on that list. The rate of possession arrests for whites in Baltimore dropped more than 20 percent since the peak of its O'Malley-era zero-tolerance policing strategy, but the rate for blacks actually went up by 20 percent since then. Maryland spends more than \$100 million a year to arrest, prosecute and incarcerate people arrested for marijuana possession, the ACLU estimates.

The arrest rate for marijuana possession for African-Americans in the city is more than twice the national average.

baltimoresun.com/opinion/editorial/bs-ed-marijuana-arrests-20130608-story.html

Yet little has changed on that front since a law went into effect in 2014 that reduced the penalty for possession of fewer than 10 grams of cannabis to a simple citation and fine. Arrests are way down — but racial disparities in enforcement aren't. A new analysis of data by Baltimore Fishbowl, in collaboration with the Baltimore Institute for Nonprofit Journalism and data researcher Andy Friedman, has found that in Baltimore African Americans are still arrested for marijuana possession at much higher rates. This despite

the streams of research finding that neither race uses the drug any more than the other.
<https://www.baltimoresun.com/opinion/editorial/bs-ed-0103-african-americans-marijuana-arrests-20190102-story.html>

Following the 2016 round of licenses for grower, processors and dispensaries, les