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HB1449 Health - Medical Cannabis Reauthorization Act – Support with Amendments

Madam Chair, Madam Vice-Chair and distinguished Members of the Committee. My name is Bob Ross and I am the President of the Prince George's County, Maryland Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), as many of you know, we are the oldest continually serving civil rights group in the Nation. We have a proud history of standing up against all forms of bigotry and discrimination, including economic. HB 1449 brings me here today to fight for economic non-discrimination in the awarding of medical cannabis licenses to grow and process for patients in the State of Maryland.

Our Chapter has been working hand in hand with the Legislative Black Caucus for several years to ensure that minorities, especially people of color, have an equitable chance of competing in what was a \$250 million dollar industry in 2019 and projections may have that number doubling by 2021. There is only one business in the state that is majority-minority owned and that is a travesty considering that African Americans make up roughly 30% of Maryland's population, but less than .06 representation in the ownership ranks of growers and processors. We can and must do better.

That brings us to the 2019 application process. According to the Commission's presentations, somewhere between 80-90% of all applicants were headed by an African American. Those applicants shelled out hundreds of thousands of dollars each simply for the privilege of applying for a medical cannabis license. That is literally millions of dollars that has been invested in trying to compete in this marketplace. The application process, to put it mildly, was a mess. The computer system the Commission used crashed as applicants attempted to finalize their applications in the web portal. There are serious questions regarding the methodology used to score and rank the applications, along with the whispers that some multi-state operators may have used "straw men" to head their applications to give the illusion of diversity. None of these circumstances can be allowed to stand.

To help remedy these problems, before you is a bill by Del. Darryl Barnes to give some relief to those 2019 applicants. Surely, we cannot tolerate throwing out the millions of dollars invested by these applicants in the trash can, can we? If we choose to do nothing for these applicants, including those are currently independent dispensaries in the marketplace, then we are failing to fulfil our oaths of office and duty to fairness and justice. Regardless of the scandals that this great body has dealt with over the years, you have always been resolute in moving the state forward. This is your opportunity to display profiles in courage and do the right thing for the 2019 applicants and current independent dispensary owners.

We understand that there will be several amendments offered to bring the bill more into a posture that will allow the Commission to move expeditiously in awarding stage one pre-approvals. We ask you for a FAVORABLE report for HB1449

Sincerely,

Robert Ross, President,
Prince George's County NAACP