

March 4, 2021

SB 708–Cannabis Legalization & Regulation- SUPPORT

Dear Chair Guzzone, Vice-Chair Rosapepe, and Members of the Budget & Taxation Committee,

The Maryland Out of School Time Network (MOST) is a statewide organization dedicated to closing opportunity gaps by expanding both the quantity and quality of afterschool and summer learning opportunities for school-aged young people. MOST is one of the fifty statewide networks supported by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and serves as Maryland’s affiliate to the National Afterschool Association.

We strongly support the provisions outlined in SB708 as a necessary measure to protect our state’s learning communities. The bill, if passed, would support an increase in resources available to build capacity of youth development organizations to serve more young people, providing the opportunities they need to thrive and succeed and avoid the school to prison pipeline.

It is well known that the criminal justice system disproportionately penalizes communities of color when it comes to drug prevention and enforcement. Even after the Maryland General Assembly decriminalized marijuana across the state in 2014, black residents still made up more than 90% of those arrested for marijuana possession despite nearly equal rates of marijuana consumption among black and white communities. Though it was a welcome improvement, the 2014 law failed to adequately address the effects that drug prevention policies have had on racial equity in our state. The proposed legislation would go a long way towards remedying these pernicious remnants of the war on drugs by abolishing the excessive punishments frequently given out for this non-violent crime.

A marijuana possession charge has devastating socioeconomic consequences for all offenders, but this is especially true with regards to young people. As many of our residents know all too well, the long arm of **the criminal justice system has the potential to follow offenders long after they’ve served their sentence**. A criminal record makes it harder to receive student financial aid and find a job. A criminal record limits housing options, reinforcing the detrimental effects of generational poverty. In this way, the drug policies enforced by our criminal justice system have undoubtedly entrenched the so-called school-to-prison pipeline both in our own state and around the country. **We must not allow the criminal justice system to be more damaging to a young person’s development than the drug which brought them to court in the first place.**

Luckily, there are more constructive alternatives to drug use prevention. Education has long been an essential component of these initiatives, and **afterschool programming is uniquely capable of providing an effective bulwark against drug use and other risky behaviors**. Data collected by the FBI shows that national juvenile delinquency rates are highest from 2-6pm on school days. While didactic drug education programs remove students from the classroom and produce mixed results when it comes to drug prevention, afterschool programs provide at-risk students with structure and fulfillment during these critical hours. They engage students by catering to the things they love most while fostering a sense of self-efficacy and community among our young people. **Athletics, science, and the arts should be at the center of our drug prevention policy, not punishment and coercion.**

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Our challenge lies in providing our communities with the resources they need to support these initiatives. At the moment, Maryland faces a significant shortfall in its afterschool programming, with our state ranking in the bottom ten when it comes to access to afterschool programs. From 2014 to 2020 the percentage of young people who would attend an afterschool program if one were available to them rose from 36 to 48% (that's 389,983 kids). As we have demonstrated, our failure to meet this demand does not merely amount to lost professional development opportunities for our students, it also deprives our most vulnerable young people of the structure they need to endure social challenges. For this reason, we strongly support the creation of a fund which specifically addresses the need for afterschool programming and youth development initiatives.

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