

February 16, 2021

HB

32

Testimony from Amaris Leon, national criminal justice reform strategist, Working Families Party, in support of HB 32

Dear Chair Clippinger, Chair Pendergrass, and members of the House Judiciary and Health and Government Operations Committees:

My name is Amaris Leon, I serve as the criminal justice reform strategist for the Working Families Party. On behalf of WFP, I testify in favor of HB32. As a party, we fight for racial equity, ending mass-incarceration and entrenched violence, and the creation of systems that unapologetically work to uplift marginalized communities, people of color and women. HB32 achieves all of that -- from full legalization to creating a pathway for budding entrepreneurs to making people harmed by the war on drugs whole.

HB32 mandates the creation of a community reinvestment and repair fund; allocation of newly generated tax revenue would enable Maryland to better fund housing assistance programs, violence prevention programs, and bring more money to HBCUs - an issue near to my heart as an HBCU Law School graduate - which contributes to the narrowing of the racial wealth gap, improves mental health outcomes and creates better learning environments for historically disadvantaged students.

Shifting focus to the social equity piece of HB32, using a portion of this new revenue to create a social equity fund would lend support to people of color who wish to enter the cannabis industry, providing an opportunity to create financial well being in an industry that they have not only been excluded from, but criminalized for.

And last but not least, HB32 will help end mass-incarceration, and the racial and gender inequalities attached. As a former foster care youth myself, I would be remiss if I did not discuss how the war on drugs disproportionately affected women and their children, breaking family structures and creating unstable communities, which as we know are drivers of crime and violence. Women have become the fastest growing prison population; 55% of all women in state facilities are mothers to minor children. Studies show that children of incarcerated mothers are more likely than children of incarcerated fathers to enter foster care. I think it comes to no surprise that foster children are at greater risk for delinquency and crime due to the impermanent nature of the system and society's general lack of concern for them, creating cyclical cycles of poverty, crime and violence at the hands of our war on drugs. In summation, we urge you to vote in favor of HB32 because the passage of it would not only economically benefit the state of Maryland, but as a public health policy, this bill will also begin the process of rebuilding communities and create long-term stability and safety.

/s/ Amaris Leon

