

Good afternoon members of the Oregon Legislative Assembly,

My name is Akele Parnell. I am an attorney with Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights, where I work to advance racial equity in the marketplace, and particularly in emerging industries such as the cannabis industry. I submit this written testimony to express my strong support for HB 3112, the Oregon Cannabis Equity Act. A strong and effective cannabis equity program must, among other things, affirmatively consider race in its efforts to ensure equal opportunity in the Oregon cannabis marketplace.

The data is clear: The War on Drugs was a war on Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities, and marijuana prohibition was its weapon of choice. The drug war was never about drugs, public health, or safety. Rather, it was about power—political power, racial power, and economic power. And this focus was made clear by its founders. Two of the drug war's leading architects?Harry J. Anslinger, the first Commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, and John Ehrlichman, former domestic policy chief for President Richard Nixon?explicitly stated that the drug war was designed to disrupt Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities.

Therefore, social equity requires that marijuana legalization center those most harmed by the War on Drugs?Black, Latinx, and Ingenious communities?just as criminalization centered their exploitation. In order for cannabis policy to be just and equitable, it must focus on repairing the racially disparate harms of the War on Drugs and the creation of economic opportunities and benefits, specifically for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities.

So far, most legalization efforts have failed to center social equity. And as a result, the majority of the wealth and economic opportunities generated by legalization have gone to wealthy white men? the same individuals whose racial and economic privilege largely shields them from the scourges of the War on Drugs. Meanwhile, the harms of the drug war continue to serve as nearly insurmountable barriers to ownership and meaningful participation in the industry for people of color. Without a course of correction, legalization will continue to recreate and reinforce the racial injustices of the War on Drugs.

This must change, and it can. But to do so, all new and existing cannabis policies must center racial equity, because social equity is racial equity. But this will not happen without provisions such as Section 7(1)(c) and Section 16(1)(b)(B) of HB 3112, which specifically direct the benefits of Oregon Cannabis Equity program to the demographic groups most disproportionately impacted by the racist War on Drugs. As we have seen in other states, proxies used to identify groups disproportionately impacted by the War on Drugs are ineffective. Racial neutral remedies for race-specific harms are not only ineffective, conceptually, they are nonsense. There are no less restrictive means that will be effective in advancing real social equity in the State of Oregon. Therefore, it is critical that the State of Oregon adopt and enact HB 3112, and its racially targeted social equity framework.

Sincerely,

Akele Parnell, Esq.
Staff Attorney
Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights