

Chicago Urban League

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**Testimony of
Kathie Kane-Willis, Chicago Urban League, to
Cook County Board of Commissioners,
Legislative and Intergovernmental Relations Committee,
on the creation of the Cook County Cannabis Commission**

Wednesday, January 15, 2020

My name is Kathie Kane-Willis, and I am the Director of Policy and Advocacy at the Chicago Urban League, an organization that has worked for more than 100 years to advance equity for African Americans and to promote strong, sustainable communities. Through our work, we have repeatedly seen how cannabis convictions can impact opportunities for individuals to attain employment, housing, education and licensure—all of which contribute to stable communities.

The League supports the Cook County Board's efforts to create a Commission tasked with examining the economic, legal, and social impact of the recreational cannabis industry on Cook County and its residents. We agree with comments in the proposed ordinance that recognize that Cook County has a duty and obligation to all residents to thoughtfully and intentionally plan, implement and monitor activities under the new cannabis legislation, and further, that a focus on social equity is both warranted and long overdue. We all know that the war on drugs has had a significant and disproportionate impact on African Americans in Cook County. In 2010, Cook County made the most marijuana possession arrests of any county in the nation -- over 33,000 arrests-- in just one year. Cook County also has the dubious distinction of the highest racial disparity - more than 7 out of each 10 individuals arrested were African American (73%), or of those 33,000 arrests nearly 25,000 were of African Americans.

We believe the proposed commission should pay particular attention to those communities that have been hardest hit by the war on drugs.

Our greatest hope is that future generations of African Americans residing in Cook County will no longer be disproportionately impacted by criminal justice system remedies to cannabis possession. Our greatest fear is the creation of a new two-tiered system of social and economic policies and practices that continue to disadvantage African Americans. A strong, proactive equity-focused approach will reduce the likelihood of this happening.

With that in mind, we ask that the following recommendations also be considered as part of the proposed ordinance.

1. **[Section 2-504 (2)]: Sunset date.** Reversing nearly 5 decades of cannabis policy and practice will take time, and there will be the need to implement, assess and then try other things before we get this right. We encourage the Commission to consider a

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sunset date in 2025 or 2026 at the earliest to give everyone time to implement, revise and report on best practices.

2. **[Section 2-504 (3)]: Collaborate and solicit information – agencies and offices.** We encourage the Commission to specify that information on the geographic placement of dispensaries and the owner/employee characteristics of these dispensaries will be collected routinely and shared publicly as part of its social equity commitment, with special emphasis on these metrics for the Disproportionately Impacted Areas; and that the Commission will partner with the government agencies/offices that can best collect and supply this information.
3. **[Section 2-504 (6)]: Recommendations of Cannabis Commission.** We encourage the Commission to make recommendations on the following additional items:
 - Policies to ensure that R3 monies are distributed to the communities that demonstrate the most need
 - Resources, programs and assistance to ensure that communities of color are able to successfully engage in this new industry and are equitably represented in the cannabis marketplace

The Chicago Urban League is cautiously optimistic that we will be able to make broad, equitable change through sound cannabis policy and practice. We look forward to partnering with you in this work.