

Testimony in Support of Cannabis Legalization
Long Island Progressive Coalition Director
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My name is Lisa Tyson. I am the director of the Long Island Progressive Coalition and a resident of Bellmore Long Island.

The Long Island Progressive Coalition (LIPC) fights for structural change at the local, state, and national levels to attain racial justice, build community wealth, and realize a just transition to a 100% renewable energy future. We mobilize Long Islanders through political education, grassroots organizing, leadership development, and the creation of cooperative economic institutions to redistribute wealth and power.

I write to you in support of cannabis legalization in New York. But any proposal worth passing must center equity, community reinvestment, remove criminal penalties, and repair the past harms caused by the failed “War on Drugs.”

Cannabis prohibition has been a racist endeavor since the beginning. Decades of criminalization have disproportionately affected Black and Brown communities, despite the fact that white people consume and sell marijuana at the same rate.

Outside of New York City, Long Island has seen some of the biggest disparities. Nassau and Suffolk counties had the highest arrest rates for low-level marijuana offenses in the state from 2010 to 2017, with people of color being arrested and prosecuted at a significantly higher rate than white people.

Many of the arrests on Long Island are the result of “stop and frisk” traffic stops, where officers stop drivers if they have a “reasonable suspicion” of criminal activity. Officers routinely use -- without evidence -- the “odor of marijuana” as a pretext in these instances.

These racially biased stop-and-frisk traffic stops are pervasive throughout Long Island. A recent Newsday analysis found that Suffolk County police officers “pulled over Black drivers almost four times more often than white drivers, and Hispanic drivers twice as often.... More tellingly, after stopping drivers, police searched Blacks over three times more frequently than whites, and Hispanics 1.7 times more frequently.”

Virginia has banned police searches based on the smell of marijuana, and in July 2020 Maryland's highest court affirmed that police can't use the smell of marijuana to search and arrest a person. A Pennsylvania appeals court ruled in October 2020 that marijuana smell alone can't form the basis for a vehicle search.

New York should follow suit in tandem with the passage of a legalization proposal rooted in racial and economic justice, so those most harmed by disproportionate enforcement of misguided prohibition policies are in a position to benefit most from our state's new, well-regulated cannabis industry, which will "generate 50,806 jobs, \$2.2 billion in employee compensation, \$4.7 billion in value added, and \$6.1 billion in total economic output," according to new study by economist James Parrot and labor market consultant Michele Mattingly.

Beyond restorative justice and economic considerations, legalizing cannabis has multiple other benefits. Marijuana use among teens has decreased in states where it is legal, and that's because legalizing and regulating recreational cannabis makes it difficult for kids to obtain. Multiple studies also show that access to legal cannabis leads to reductions in 40% in opioid-related deaths.

There is broad support on Long Island for legalization. We are ready to build the new industry on long island farms, ready for the multitude of supportive businesses, ready to open dispensaries owned by the communities most harmed by the drug wars.

This is the year New York should legalize cannabis, but we must do it the right way.