

Expanding Workforce Training to Promote Cannabis Industry Equity

Cannabis Justice Employment Initiative Launches New Harlem Program to Empower Communities Impacted by the War on Drugs

A New York City-based nonprofit organization, the Cannabis Justice Employment Initiative (CJEI), has announced the launch of a new program in Harlem aimed at empowering communities disproportionately affected by the War on Drugs. After the successful graduation of their inaugural cohort, CJEI is preparing to start a 16-week course to continue their mission of social equity and workforce development within New York State's burgeoning cannabis industry.

Bridging the Gap Between Legal Cannabis and Impacted Communities

Terrence Coffie, Executive Director of CJEI, emphasized the importance of providing residents in New York City neighborhoods most impacted by the War on Drugs with the resources and opportunities to join the legal cannabis market. "This was birthed out of our love for the community," Coffie stated, underscoring the organization's commitment to ensuring equitable access to the cannabis industry, as promised by the Marijuana Regulation and Taxation Act (MRTA).

The Founding Vision of CJEI

The CJEI was founded last year by a team of professionals dedicated to social justice and equity in the cannabis industry. Alongside Coffie, the founding team includes Sean Farrow, an attorney and professor at New York University (NYU); Jamil Myrie, Vice President of Retail Operations at Acreage Holdings; and Jeffrey Hoffman, a cannabis-focused attorney. Together, they have been working to provide both workforce training for individuals seeking to enter the cannabis industry and legal support for those looking to expunge past cannabis convictions.

Addressing the Need for Expungement Services

One of CJEI's key initiatives is to assist individuals in navigating the expungement process for past cannabis-related convictions, a critical need in communities heavily policed during the War on Drugs. Jeffrey Hoffman highlighted that many people are unaware of their legal rights concerning expungement, despite the MRTA provisions that allow for the erasure of certain cannabis convictions.

Hoffman explained that while some low-level possession convictions are automatically expunged by the courts, individuals are often not informed of this, leading them to unnecessarily disclose past convictions when applying for jobs. In other cases, individuals must file a motion to have their records cleared, a process in which Hoffman and other attorneys have been offering pro-bono assistance to CJEI clients.

A Legal Victory in Saratoga County

Hoffman recently secured a significant legal win for a CJEI client in Saratoga County. The client, who had two cannabis-related Class E felonies on his record, initially faced the prospect of having his felonies substituted with lesser charges instead of being fully vacated. However, Hoffman successfully argued that the MRTA intended for these convictions to be entirely erased, leading the judge to vacate the convictions without substitution.

CJIE's Dual Approach: Expungement and Workforce Development

Jamil Myrie stressed the importance of integrating expungement services with workforce development, noting that past convictions can severely hinder job prospects, both within and outside the cannabis industry. Myrie, an experienced entrepreneur in the cannabis space, emphasized the need for CJIE to meet people where they are, holding informational meetings in community hubs like Harlem's St. Nicholas housing projects.

"We have to be part of that justice piece in order that these folks in these communities can access the job opportunities," Myrie said. He pointed out that without addressing the legal barriers posed by past convictions, efforts to connect individuals to job opportunities in the cannabis industry would be futile.

Workforce Training: Building a Future in Cannabis

CJIE's workforce training program is designed to be comprehensive and accessible, offering free training that covers cultivation, retail operations, workplace rights, and career development. The program's first cohort graduated 25 individuals last year, and the upcoming class is expected to include 30 participants. Coffie noted that while the organization aims to eventually graduate 1,500 people, keeping the cohort sizes small ensures that each participant receives personalized attention and support.

Looking Ahead: Collaboration with the Office of Cannabis Management

As CJIE continues to expand its efforts, the organization hopes to maintain a strong working relationship with the Office of Cannabis Management (OCM), even as the agency undergoes leadership changes. With former Executive Director Chris Alexander and Chief Equity Officer Damian Fagon no longer in their roles, Coffie expressed optimism about working with interim leader Felicia Reid and future leadership to continue advocating for communities impacted by the War on Drugs.

Coffie also pointed out the importance of holding community conversations in the neighborhoods most affected by past cannabis policies, a practice he hopes to see more of under the new OCM leadership. "That is the leverage of who we are and what we do, because of our relationship with the community," Coffie remarked, highlighting CJIE's deep ties to the communities it serves.

Empowering Communities Through Action

The Cannabis Justice Employment Initiative's expansion into Harlem marks a significant step forward in its mission to provide social equity and workforce development in New York's legal cannabis industry. By offering both expungement services and job training, CJIE is working to ensure that those most impacted by the War on Drugs have the opportunity to participate in and benefit from the new legal market. As the program prepares to welcome its next cohort of participants, CJIE remains committed to advocating for justice and economic empowerment in New York City's most underserved communities.

