

PA Black Lawmakers Push Cannabis Legalization, Social Equity

Black Lawmakers Push for Cannabis Legalization in Pennsylvania, Emphasizing Social Justice

As Pennsylvania once again considers marijuana legalization, Black lawmakers who have long advocated for reform are spotlighting the urgency of ending prohibition with a focus on social justice. At last week's Black Cannabis Week event, hosted by the Diasporic Alliance for Cannabis Opportunities (DACO), several key legislators and activists discussed their legislative priorities and motivations behind advancing legalization in the Keystone State.

Among the prominent figures present were Sen. Sharif Street (D) and Reps. Chris Rabb (D), Amen Brown (D), Darisha Parker (D), and Napoleon Nelson (D). These lawmakers engaged with advocates to address how Pennsylvania can shape a marijuana legalization program that centers equity and justice, especially for communities disproportionately impacted by prohibition.

A Complex Political Landscape in Pennsylvania

Rep. Napoleon Nelson (D) emphasized the unique political dynamics in Pennsylvania, calling it a "weird battleground" that the rest of the nation often watches with skepticism. He noted that this political complexity could make passing marijuana legalization more challenging, especially as Election Day approaches.

"We got to figure out how in the world we can provide those opportunities that meet everybody," Nelson said, referring to the challenge of creating an equitable legal framework. He also highlighted how Pennsylvania could learn from the successes and failures of neighboring states like New York, where marijuana legalization has already been enacted.

Nelson underscored the importance of equity, asking attendees to think about the long-term effects of legalization. "I want everybody to think about and envision 10 years from now... If we've done our jobs right, social equity entrepreneurs have been identified, they've been licensed, and they've been given the

resources they need to be successful.”

Calls for Social Justice and Equity

Rep. Chris Rabb (D), an outspoken advocate for equity in marijuana reform, was blunt in his remarks about the need for communities most affected by prohibition to shape Pennsylvania’s cannabis market.

“I’m tired of crumbs. Who cuts up the pie?” Rabb said passionately. “The people closest to the pain should be cutting up the pie... We free us. We’re not waiting for anyone else to free us.”

Sen. Sharif Street (D) echoed Rabb’s sentiment, stressing that lawmakers must establish “real metrics” to evaluate the success of social equity measures under a legal marijuana system. These metrics, he said, should guide future revisions to ensure the law continues to serve communities most affected by prohibition.

The Legislative Window is Narrowing

Rep. Darisha Parker (D) offered practical advice to those advocating for cannabis reform, reminding them of the limited time lawmakers have to act before the session ends.

“If you don’t know when we are finished with our session this year, shame on y’all. Look at the calendar,” Parker said. “We have a short calendar for you to get your objectives to us... If you have objectives and you want us to address them, make sure you get it in front of us now so we can bring it home.”

The sense of urgency in the room was palpable, especially as Pennsylvania lawmakers face increasing pressure from advocates, constituents, and even neighboring states to move forward on marijuana reform.

Bipartisan Support and Challenges Ahead

Last month, Reps. Aaron Kaufer (R) and Emily Kinhead (D) introduced a bipartisan marijuana legalization bill, gaining support from 15 cosponsors. Gov. Josh Shapiro (D) has also expressed his commitment to fighting for legalization, though it was left out of the budget bill he signed in July.

Senate President Pro Tempore Kim Ward (R), a Republican who has previously voiced concerns about marijuana legalization, recently signaled a softening stance. According to an activist who spoke with her, Ward indicated she is against arresting people over cannabis and revealed that marijuana had played a role in her personal life. Her comments have given advocates hope that the political resistance to reform might be easing.

Public Support for Legalization Grows

A recent poll from five key swing districts in Pennsylvania found strong support for marijuana legalization, with majorities in favor of passing reform as soon as possible. The survey results add to the mounting pressure on lawmakers to act before the political window closes ahead of the November elections.

However, while there is growing momentum, some lawmakers have cautioned that the remainder of the legislative session may be too politically charged to see legalization through this year. As Rep. Rabb and Sen. Street continue to push for reform, the possibility of a longer timeline remains.

Economic and Social Justice Benefits

Advocates and lawmakers alike point to the economic and social justice benefits of legalizing marijuana in Pennsylvania. A report commissioned by activists projected that the state could see up to \$2.8 billion in adult-use marijuana sales within the first year, generating \$720 million in tax revenue and creating 45,000 jobs.

At the June cannabis rally at the Pennsylvania State Capitol, lawmakers and activists alike emphasized the need for social equity provisions in any legalization bill. Sen. Dan Laughlin (R), who has worked across party lines with Sen. Street on this issue, also expressed optimism, stating that Pennsylvania is “getting close” to legalizing marijuana. But he noted that success will depend on cooperation between the governor, House, and Senate leaders.

Federal Cannabis Rescheduling and State-Level Progress

As Pennsylvania moves toward legalization, the federal government’s potential rescheduling of marijuana remains a wildcard. Both Sen. Street and Sen. Laughlin have argued that federal rescheduling could smooth the path to state-level legalization and have urged the Biden administration to act swiftly on the issue.

Despite the hurdles, Pennsylvania lawmakers remain committed to passing a cannabis legalization bill that prioritizes equity and economic opportunity. With bipartisan support growing and public opinion increasingly in favor, the state may soon join others in ending the prohibition of marijuana.

As Pennsylvania's legislative session approaches its end, Black lawmakers continue to champion marijuana reform with a focus on social justice and equity. While challenges remain, both political and logistical, the momentum for legalization is building. With neighboring states already legalizing cannabis and federal rescheduling on the horizon, Pennsylvania may be next in line to end prohibition—though much work remains to ensure that the transition is equitable and benefits those most harmed by decades of marijuana criminalization.

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