

Equity, Social Justice, and Weed: Introducing Yes We Cannabis

Humanity has a peerless ability to make a mess of even the most beautiful of things, and for quite some time, cannabis has been right there at the top of the heap, entangled with racist and anti-immigrant motivations ever since Federal prohibition reared its ugly head in 1937.

In Rhode Island, the situation is dire. In April 2020, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) reported that people of color are almost 3 and a half times more likely to be arrested for cannabis possession in the state than white people, despite comparable usage rates. The report further revealed that racially motivated trends have been getting worse, not better, over the past 10 years. Cannabis prohibition and discriminatory immigration practices have also found themselves entwined in Rhode Island, with an individual deported as recently as early March under the auspices of a cannabis-related crime. And with a quickly devised adult-use bill from the new McKee State House expected to get over the line sometime this summer, unaddressed community disparities will likely continue to fester unresolved.

That is why a group of cannabis equity advocates and non-profit organizations from across the state united to form Yes We Cannabis, a community-focused collation that fights for cannabis legalization that “prioritizes social justice and equity.” In the words of group spokesperson **Emily Cotter**, “Yes We Cannabis elevates the voices of those who normally don’t get an opportunity to have a seat at the table.”

“Many states have failed in social equity,” continues Cotter during a lengthy phone call on drizzly afternoon, “but if we move forward without addressing the harms of cannabis legalization, we will fail to construct a framework that ensures equity into the future. What Yes We Cannabis strives to achieve is to put these pieces into place before laws pass.”

Emailing a single, comprehensive document, Cotter reveals how Yes We Cannabis is structured around five key points that outline “what a just and equitable model of cannabis legalization” would look like in Rhode Island (edited):

1. Automatic expungement for prior cannabis offenses.
2. An equitable, fair and inclusive cannabis industry, including cannabis business licenses not exceeding \$500 and tax breaks for businesses with workforces that include a significant percentage of people who were formerly incarcerated and/or who live in a disproportionately impacted area.
3. Reinvest cannabis revenue in communities hardest hit by the war on drugs, including affordable housing, community schools, expanded Head Start and scholarship assistance.
4. Establish civil protections and prohibit discrimination, including ending state and local agencies taking actions against an employee for using cannabis outside of work, as well as protections for undocumented people and immigrants.
5. Strengthen the medical cannabis program and support economically disadvantaged patients, including eliminating the 4% Compassion Center surcharge applied to medical marijuana sales.

The collation's message is uncompromising, and Cotter, who is the Chief Operating Officer at hemp operation Lovewell Farms in Narragansett Pier, is surrounded by powerful colleagues and peers who add further weight to the collective voice: the ACLU, the Marijuana Policy Project, Formerly Incarcerated Union (FIU), Rhode Island Political Cooperative, Regulate RI and Reclaim RI, as well as a host of independent cannabis and drug policy reform advocates, lawyers, public defenders and legal experts.

"The time to act is now," continues Cotter. "In Rhode Island we have to legalize through legislature, not a ballot measure. This year with a new governor, there is a new attitude at the State House, but what they are proposing fails to mention expungement and community investment."

But what of the governor's seemingly Marvel-inspired "Cannabis Reinvestment Task Force," an outfit permitted to make recommendations on how cannabis revenues could be used in job training, small business support and community development, including affordable housing and equity?

"It is so lackluster, nothing more than lip service. We don't want it passed through."

Even with McKee's "lip service" toward equity and affordable living, the issue of social housing remains a murky grey area. The Federal government oversees the Housing Choice Voucher Program, commonly known as Section 8, and since cannabis is currently on the Federal Controlled Substances naughty list, the two are unable to legally coexist. And here we step once more into the matter of race. According to the State Of Rhode Island's 2020 *Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice*, black and Hispanic families are more likely to live in Section 8 housing than any other group. If adult-use is legalized for Rhode Islanders, just what percentage of us will benefit, and more critically, what will our skin color be?

"What we need is the removal of cannabis from the state-controlled substances act," explains Cotter, finding a loophole as a fight for equity (how far haven't we come). "Only then can we be truly in control of what happens in our own backyard."

Cherie Cruz is the co-founder of Yes We Cannabis Collation member FIU, and as an individual directly impacted by cannabis inequity, Cruz is clear on the local situation: "Rhode Islanders have spent decades with these barriers in place, these collateral consequences, barring them from housing, employment, education.

"We know that the criminalization of marijuana is a tool that has been used to disproportionately impact certain populations, particularly Black and brown and poor communities. [Adult-use legalization] is an opportunity for our state legislators to really turn the tide and make this right, repair those harms."

Cruz's colleague **Meko Lincoln** has also been directly impacted by cannabis discrimination, and has suffered similar shared experiences: "For too long has our country turned a blind eye to particular populations pushed to the fringe and not allowed to participate in the process. This shift to legalize the sale, purchase and consumption of marijuana is a welcomed by Yes We Cannabis, but it must accompany some real reparations and reflect a true understanding of the harms done in the past."

By uniting this varied group of committed, differently experienced individuals and community groups, Yes We Cannabis has achieved the unthinkable: a formidable force for good spearheading a charge against institutional inequity that the state has not been seen before at this level. Indeed, the collation is even singular among advocacy groups at a national level.

As Cruz neatly concludes: "It's about having all these different viewpoints, perspectives, knowledge and skills, and bringing them together to make sure we have a great legalization bill here in Rhode Island.

"Because we have an opportunity to show the rest of the country how we can do it."