

Changing the Face of Cannabis Ownership: A 6-Point Plan for Black Equity in the Industry

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High Society

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Photo: Associated Press

Oakland, Calif., native Tucky Blunt was arrested 15 years ago for an \$80 marijuana sale that ended up changing the trajectory of his life. He was slapped with 10-year felony probation, legally giving law enforcement officials the agency to search him at any time. Years later, the 39-year-old turned lemons into lemonade and is now capitalizing off of the same product that led to his arrest—by opening his own marijuana dispensary dubbed Blunts and Moore.

Blunt tried to enter the industry on his own but struggled with the high cost of entry and information gaps that hinder black people from entering the business as owners. He was able to pursue his entrepreneurial dreams through participating in an equity program established by the city of Oakland designed to help residents who were most harmed by the War on Drugs with assistance, support, and resources to step into the cannabis industry.

For many people like Blunt and others living in black communities throughout the country, selling marijuana was utilized as a means for survival. The men and women involved in the underground industry relied on it to provide for themselves and their families. Many of those individuals are sitting in prison cells today—some have been for decades—as they watch the white community capitalize and monopolize an industry that was built on their backs.

According to a 2017 report released by Marijuana Business Daily, 81 percent of cannabis business owners are white, while only a mere 4.3 percent are black.

As legalization moves forward in several states, it is imperative that communities *most harmed* not only have a seat at the table in the cannabis industry but benefit from it the most. There needs to be social restorative justice. How do we ensure that there are more

narratives of success like Blunt's? How do we guarantee that legislation encompasses social and economic equity which addresses decades of oppression and unjust criminalization? What do we do to make sure black folks are the leaders of the cannabis industry rather than only relegated to roles of consumers and workers?

While lawmakers in New York are eager to push legalization forward—especially Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who says cannabis legalization will be at the top of his list within his first 100 days in office—it's crucial that the ravaging impact the War on Drugs has had on the black community is examined and regulations that would be instrumental in leveling the playing field in this industry are implemented. Black elected officials in New York say they will block the legalization of marijuana if legislation doesn't prove to be beneficial for their communities. They want to ensure that black and brown folks get their fair share of the expected \$3 billion in revenue from adult use (recreational) marijuana and prevent missed opportunities at economic justice, as we've seen in other states across the country where marijuana has been legalized. Gov. Cuomo and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio must ensure reparative measures are at the top of their cannabis legislative agenda.

Inspired by the 10-Point Program created by the Black Panther Party 53 years ago, which served as a foundation for the ideologies, beliefs, and needs of the black community to overcome injustice in America, the Harlem Business Alliance has developed a Six-Point platform to ensure that the government creates equitable economic opportunities in this industry for black people and that black communities are protected from mega-million dollar cannabis entities.

1. Equity applicants

The War on Drugs didn't just affect those who were arrested and incarcerated; mass criminalization tore apart families and forever changed the neighborhoods primarily occupied by black people, impacting millions. Individuals from communities most harmed who were arrested, convicted and incarcerated, and their families should qualify as equity applicants. Longtime residents who lived in these communities in the decades prior to 2000 should also qualify.

2. Funding

To fiscally address the damage done, the government needs to provide monetary resources for communities that were most harmed. There should be sufficient funding provided—*on day one*—for equity applicants to create a sustainable business that employs community residents, particularly the individuals most harmed. It's crucial that there is an immediate investment in protected communities.

3. Tax revenue

All tax revenue from cannabis companies should be allocated to communities most harmed. There is a direct connection between marijuana incarcerations and low income, racially isolated, and underserved communities. Every available dollar is necessary to reverse the results of racism, financial and banking “redlining,” underachieving schools, high rates of unemployment and public assistance, and substance abuse.

4. Vacate convictions

Like Blunt—who was able to overcome his past and step into success in this industry—there needs to be a clear pathway put in place for those who have past marijuana offenses. This includes the expungement of all marijuana-related convictions. Furthermore, there should be no restrictions on applicants who have been convicted of nonviolent crimes to own businesses or licenses or to work in the industry.

5. Equity incubators

The Harlem Business Alliance has been instrumental in educating and empowering black entrepreneurs. In an effort to increase representation in cannabis business ownership, it’s imperative that the government team up with culturally sensitive and competent, community-based organizations—that have a track record of fostering economic initiatives—to be incubators. Providing these organizations with substantial funding on day one is an essential component of moving this effort forward.

6. Leveling period

The cannabis industry is moving at a quick pace and we can’t afford to leave black communities behind. There needs to be at least a three-year period of exclusive licensing opportunities for equity applicants, as well as a 10-year leveling period for black entrepreneurs with exclusive rights to own and operate a business within the boundaries of communities most harmed.

It’s almost April and we’re in the final push to get our voices heard and demand our equitable share. Get involved. Pen a letter to your local officials and show up to hearings and rallies with advocacy initiatives like the Start SMART campaign. There are events happening almost every day where you can educate yourself. Join meetup groups like ours, the Green Revolution, and stay informed. It is incumbent upon our elected representatives and community leaders to ensure that legalization of adult use marijuana is a transformative vehicle of economic empowerment for the black community.

Regina Smith serves as the executive director of the Harlem Business Alliance. She is a fierce advocate for equity in the economic, social and political justice spaces for the black community. Follow the Harlem Business Alliance on .