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**\*\*\*FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE\*\*\***

***WITH JUST DAYS LEFT TO ACT AND AMID TALKS OF  
RESUMED NEGOTIATIONS, ADVOCATES CALL ON STATE  
LAWMAKERS TO ENACT COMPREHENSIVE MARIJUANA  
LEGALIZATION AND TO CREATE COMMUNITY  
REINVESTMENT FUND FOR NEW YORKERS  
DISPROPORTIONATELY IMPACTED BY THE DRUG WAR***

**(NEW YORK, NY) – With just days left in the New York State legislative session and amid resumed negotiations, Start SMART NY – a coalition comprised of organizations and advocates dedicated to criminal justice reform, civil rights, public health, and community-based organizations who support marijuana legalization with robust social justice and equity provisions – rallied out front of New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo’s New York City office urging lawmakers to enact the Marijuana Regulation and Taxation Act (S.1527B/A.1617B), known as the MRTA immediately.**

Sponsored by Senator Liz Kruger and Assembly Majority Leader Peoples-Stokes, the amended MRTA ends prohibition, which has long criminalized Black and Latino people and other communities of color; clears prior cannabis-related criminal records; addresses additional devastating impacts of marijuana criminalization in the fields of immigration, family law, housing, and employment; and includes a social and economic equity plan that prioritizes licenses for people from communities most affected by criminalization.

The bill also directs tax revenue from legal marijuana sales to be reinvested in communities most harmed by the war on drugs through the Community Grants Reinvestment Fund, which will fund job training, economic empowerment, youth development programming, and re-entry services. Additional revenue will be used to support public schools in the state plus drug treatment programs and evidence-based public education campaigns. If enacted, it will be the first law of its kind in the country to allocate permanent funding for community reinvestment.

Over the past week, both New York State Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins and New York State Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie have discussed the MRTA in conference with

their members. The Legislature has until Wednesday, June 19, 2019 to act unless lawmakers decide to extend this year's session.

“Despite decriminalization efforts, thousands of Black and Latino New Yorkers across the state are still being arrested for low-level marijuana possession, which can trigger months and years of ICE detention and deportation, sever access to essential public benefits, and result in the loss of one's children to foster care,” said **Anne Oredoko, Supervising Attorney of the Racial Justice Unit at The Legal Aid Society**. “Decriminalization has failed to prevent this devastation and only continues the damage done to communities of color. With the time that we have left in the session, Albany must enact the revised Marijuana Regulation and Taxation Act to legalize marijuana, expunge past convictions, and to invest in the communities that have shouldered the brunt of prohibition.”

**Lisa Schreibersdorf, Executive Director of Brooklyn Defender Services**, said: “Legislators and the Governor have a chance to make New York a leader by enacting what is arguably the strongest marijuana legalization bill in the country. By expunging and vacating past convictions, prohibiting the use of marijuana as a pretext for racially-targeted police searches and harassment and devastating child removals, and ensuring public investment and new economic opportunities in communities ravaged by the war on drugs, the MRTA means marijuana justice for New York. These critical provisions must not get rolled back during negotiations so that past harms can be remedied and New Yorkers will be protected against future loss of opportunity, education, and employment.”

“As we approach the end of the legislative session, it is imperative that the Legislature pass and the Governor sign the MRTA and legalize marijuana once and for all,” said **Eli Northrup, Associate Special Counsel to the Criminal Defense Practice at The Bronx Defenders**. “Decriminalization is not sufficient. We need marijuana justice that undoes the untold damage of the War on Drugs. We need marijuana justice that ensures that revenue from legal sales is reinvested in the communities that have been most affected by the discriminatory enforcement of our marijuana laws. And we need it now. The clients we serve cannot endure another year of racist arrests and prosecutions, deportations, and family separations due to marijuana prohibition.”

“The heightened risk of deportation faced by immigrant New Yorkers is another reason why we urgently need to pass the Marijuana Regulation and Taxation Act (MRTA),” said **Mizue Aizeki, Acting Executive Director of the Immigrant Defense Project**. “Decriminalization has failed to break the arrest to deportation pipeline for Black and Brown immigrants across the state—we can only move forward by ensuring that legalization addresses the devastating impact marijuana prohibition has had on immigrant communities. Because even a marijuana violation can result in

deportation or prevent access to legal status, New York must regulate marijuana in a way that minimizes negative immigration consequences and ensures those convicted of marijuana offenses in the past have access to expungement options that are effective before Immigration Courts and adjudicators. These are the types of protections that are in the revised MRTA—New York must pass the MRTA now to protect our immigrant communities.”

“White youth consume cannabis, but Black and Brown youth are always the ones arrested, kicked out of school and criminalized by their landlords. The NYPD has made NYC millions by arresting and destroying the lives of Black and Brown young people due to their consumption of a plant. Legalize cannabis now,” said **Javier López, Chief Strategy Officer, Red Hook Initiative.**

“The MRTA enables New York State to lead the way with the best cannabis framework in the country from a multitude of angles: social equity, social justice, police training, public health education, youth prevention and more,” said **Josh Weinstein, Founder of CannaGather.** “There is a consistent 55-62 percent majority in favor of legalization state-wide that is consistent in the suburbs, as well. This bill gives that majority what it is looking for and delivers on concerns of potential detractors rightfully disenchanted with the status quo.”

“Passing the MRTA is essential to ensure that the communities most harmed by the war on drugs get access to an industry they helped build. Since its introduction in America, Black and Latinx culture has driven cannabis consumption from the margins of popular culture to the mainstream, said **Imani Dawson, Executive Director, Cannabis Education Advocacy Symposium and Expo (C.E.A.S.E.)** “Those communities are at the forefront of the social justice and equity movements powering much of the local and national conversations about legalization. We must ensure that the groups responsible for popularizing and sustaining cannabis culture also get a financial stake in the multi-billion dollar legalized industry. The MRTA designates day one funding to secure their participation and the restoration of New York communities ravaged by the drug war.”

“New York has one of the biggest unlicensed or “legacy” markets in the United States currently generating \$3.8 billion per year in untaxed revenue. As we move closer to a society where cannabis is legal, we must be mindful to build pathways to the tax-paying regulated market rather than re-introduce legacy market members into the criminal justice system. The MRTA takes this element into account allowing for a space to build new opportunities, sustainable businesses and safer communities.” said **Saki Fenderson, Co-Founder, Tainted Love Bk.**

“The Marijuana Regulation and Taxation Act (MRTA S.1527/ A.1617) centers communities that have been targeted by the War on Drugs through community reinvestment, equity programs,

expungement, and no re-criminalization of the underground market. We recognize that people of color have historically been farmers, practitioners, and pharmacists of the marijuana plant and should have support and opportunities to transition into the regulated market,” said **Emily M Ramos, Founder of High Mi Madre, a womyn and femme of color Marijuana Cooperative.** “MRTA is the most progressive bill introduced in the country: 25% of the tax revenue goes to the state education department, 25% to drug treatment programs and a public education fund, and 50% into a community reinvestment fund. MRTA ensures our communities are no longer surviving, but thriving.”

“Marijuana regulation is fully consistent with support for prevention, treatment and recovery from substance use disorders. National data shows that access to cannabis clearly correlates with lower rates of death and injury due to opioid overdose. Marijuana use needs to be looked at as a public health issue, not one for the criminal justice system. Marijuana prohibition tears families apart, and our families who have been impacted by opioid overdose deaths support the MRTA as a means to repairing the damage to families, particularly families of color,” said **Steven Rabinowitz, Vice-President of Families for Sensible Drug Policy and a former NY State official in addiction services.**

"The Marijuana Regulation and Taxation Act (MRTA) is a perfect example of comprehensive policy that centers equity and directly redresses the injustices committed against our communities of color by the war on drugs," said **Vanessa Agudelo, Councilperson for the City of Peekskill in Westchester County.** "If our state elected leaders understand the racist history of marijuana prohibition and are truly committed to dismantling the institutional racism their past colleagues have and continue to facilitate, they must act on the urgency of passing MRTA this legislative session."

“We believe that Marijuana legalization by way of the Marijuana Regulation and Taxation Act (MRTA) is the ONLY way to ensure safe, educated use for those 21 years and older, clear the records of those unduly convicted, allows for priority equitable licensing, and reinvest in our communities. Young people in NYC remain abused by the War on Drugs and disproportionately enforced marijuana decriminalization practices. Any effort to legalize marijuana that does not follow suit with the MRTA is neither just nor does it address the racial, socio-economic, and collateral consequences of prohibition,” said **Dr. Marsha Jean-Charles, Lead Organizer of The Brotherhood/Sister Sol**

“Marijuana prohibition in El Barrio (East Harlem) has been a war on our Latino and Black families who have built this community! What MRTA would mean for El Barrio; it ENDS criminalizing our black and brown families including those who would remain in the gray market. It means community development. It means we can help families have generational

wealth. Families cannot wait for Cuomo to use as a campaign hook next yr! Our people need MRTA NOW,” said **Pilar DeJesus, Board Member of East Harlem Preservation**

"Marijuana prohibition is one the most successful misinformation campaigns to ever exist," said **Powerplant Global Strategies Senior Communications Strategist Leland Radovanovic**. "The MRTA allows New York the opportunity to right the wrongs of its past and chart a new path forward for its future. A path without criminal cannabis penalties or records and a path with small business entrepreneurship opportunities and lifelong reinvestment into our communities that need it most. These MRTA provisions put New Yorkers, and our diverse communities, first."

“Since 2013 activists and drug policy experts from around the state have been tirelessly working on the MRTA, a landmark piece of legislation to regulate cannabis in our state.” said **Deputy Director of Empire State NORML, Troy Smit**. “What the legislature has in front of them is the result of legislators and advocates striving to craft a program that institutes monumental changes in our state. Changes like securing dedicated funds for community reinvestment, social justice on day one, legalizing personal cultivation for all New Yorkers, and ending the criminal penalties associated with using and possessing cannabis that have affected millions of New Yorkers. This bill in its current form is what a majority of New Yorkers’ want, and it’s what they deserve.”

“The Westchester Coalition for Police Reform applauds our legislators for acting with vision and courage in drafting a cannabis reform bill that truly prioritizes social and racial equity. We strongly encourage our leaders to make this vision a reality of which we can all be proud by passing this historic measure.”

"Advocates and allies in our Senate and Assembly from around New York State have spent years crafting the Marijuana Regulation and Taxation Act (MRTA), which we believe to be the gold standard of legalization." said **Executive Director of Rochester NORML, Mary Kruger**. "Our leaders in NY have a chance to make history, to pass the first legalization bill ever that begins to address prior harm of criminalization, create equity and diversity in the industry, and reinvest in communities most impacted --- from day one. The bill currently in front of Governor Cuomo, Assembly Speaker Heastie, and Senate Leader Stewart-Cousins took into close consideration the successes and failures from other states legalizing before us, along with the voices of what people and stakeholders across NYS want to see in legalization. As a voice for responsible cannabis consumers, we urge our leaders to keep the current components of justice, equity, and reinvestment in the MRTA, and pass this bill that benefits all New Yorkers', not just a few."

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[Start SMART NY](#) is a campaign to end marijuana prohibition and repair the harms to communities convened by the Drug Policy Alliance in partnership with groups dedicated to ending marijuana prohibition.