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*Testimony of Speaker Rachel Talbot Ross presenting*  
**LD 1517, An Act to Create Equity in the State's  
Cannabis Industry**

*Before the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs*

Good afternoon, Senator Hickman, Representative Supica, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs. My name is Rachel Talbot Ross. I represent House District 118 which is located on the peninsula of Portland, and I serve as Speaker of the House of Representatives. Thank you for the opportunity to present **LD 1517, An Act To Create Equity in the State's Cannabis Industry.**

I would like to begin by setting the context for this bill which can be found in efforts that have been taking place throughout the country to assist individuals and communities who are facing barriers in starting cannabis businesses due to the historically disparate enforcement of cannabis crimes and the need to positively impact those communities.

Dating back to the 1970s with the proliferation of the 'war on drugs' policies in the United States, millions of Americans were subjected to overly harsh and extreme sentencing policies that caused an overwhelming increase in our prison population, criminalization, and lifelong criminal records; disrupting or altogether eliminating their access to adequate resources and supports to live healthy lives. African Americans, people of color, those living in poverty, and socially excluded groups, including ethnic minorities and women, were disproportionately targeted. The "drug war logic" became embedded in key *social determinants of health* and has negatively impacted where people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship and age.

Rather than supporting the health and wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities, the U.S. drug war has exacerbated harm that has been and will continue to be felt for generations.

It is through this historical lens - and with the legalization of cannabis - that opportunities to mitigate that harm are long overdue. LD 1517 seeks to do so through the creation of a social equity program.

Traditional social equity programs are designed to promote equitable ownership and employment opportunities in order to decrease disparities in life outcomes for marginalized communities, and to specifically address the disproportionate impacts of the 'war on drugs' in those communities.

LD1517 is based on a public/private partnership model. It seeks to not only create a pathway to entrepreneurship in the cannabis marketplace for those targeted by cannabis criminalization but to help decrease the wage and wealth gaps of these populations by encouraging targeted business and workforce development in growth industries identified in the State's Economic Development Strategy.

- **Create the Social Equity Development Fund (Fund)** in DECD to provide grants to help seed the development of new businesses. The Fund would be able to accept funding from the private, philanthropic, and nonprofit sectors to further the purposes of the act.
- **Expand the usage of the Public Health and Safety Fund** in order to fund the Program and include economic and community development as a deliverable.
- **Establish a Business Navigator** position within the Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD) to conduct outreach to the impacted communities, with an emphasis on the non-immigrant African American population to connect individuals to education and technical business assistance, improve access to State, local, and, where applicable, Federal business start-up resources, as well as securing monies to increase/build the Fund.
- **Establish an Ombudsperson** position within DECD, to assist with licensing and regulatory compliance necessary for establishing a cannabis business, and to serve as a mediator for conflict resolution.
- **Establish a Workforce Navigator** position within the Department of Labor (DOL) to work in collaboration with DECD in creating pre-apprentice/apprenticeship opportunities in the industries which have been identified in the state's 10-year economic development strategy.
- **Establish a Social Equity Cannabis Initiative (Initiative)** within the Office of Cannabis Policy (OCP) tailored to Maine's unique market stage and conditions. The design should include specific strategies to address the historical harm of the 'war on drugs' on the targeted populations. At the minimum the initiative will:
  - **Develop a mentor program** within OCP that would reduce license renewal fees for participating established license holders who provide guidance to new industry participants,
  - **Waive license and renewal fees** for social equity applicants
  - **Eliminate the current five-year "look back"** that disqualifies people with a drug conviction from becoming license holders.

This bill is a result of discussions held with state agencies, stakeholders and policy makers of which some are here today to offer their support.

I am happy to answer any questions and excited to work with the committee to find solutions to this long standing issue. Thank you for your consideration.