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STATE OF RHODE ISLAND

IN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

JANUARY SESSION, A.D. 2021

A N A C T

RELATING TO FOOD AND DRUGS-THE RHODE ISLAND CANNABIS EQUITY ACT

Introduced By: Representatives Ranglin-Vassell, Carson, Kislak, Hull, Ajello, Fogarty,  
Potter, Alzate, Barros, and Henries

Date Introduced: February 25, 2021

Referred To: House Finance

It is enacted by the General Assembly as follows:

1 SECTION 1. Title 21 of the General Laws entitled "FOOD AND DRUGS" is hereby  
2 amended by adding thereto the following chapter:

3 CHAPTER 28.11

4 THE RHODE ISLAND CANNABIS EQUITY ACT

5 **21-28.11-1. Short title.**

6 This act shall be known and may be cited as the Rhode Island Cannabis Equity Act.

7 **21-28.11-2. Legislative findings.**

8 The general assembly finds and declares the following:

9 (1) In 2005, Rhode Island passed the Edward O. Hawkins and Thomas C. Slater Medical  
10 Marijuana Act. Rhode Island has also decriminalized possession of one ounce or less of cannabis  
11 for personal use. With the advent of different states throughout the country legalizing cannabis, the  
12 general assembly finds that regulating it in a way that reduces barriers to entry into the legal,  
13 regulated market would benefit the state and those individuals who are inequitably being denied  
14 the opportunity to enter into the business of selling and cultivating cannabis due to financial,  
15 educational and other barriers.

16 (2) Cannabis prohibition had a devastating impact on communities in Rhode Island and  
17 across the United States. Persons convicted of a cannabis offense and their families suffer the long-  
18 term consequences of prohibition. These individuals have a more difficult time entering the newly  
19 created adult-use cannabis industry due, in part, to a lack of access to capital, business space,

1 technical support, and regulatory compliance assistance.

2 (3) During the era of cannabis prohibition in Rhode Island, the burdens of arrests,  
3 convictions, and long-term collateral consequences arising from a conviction affected people of all  
4 racess at nearly identical rates. The collateral consequences associated with cannabis law violations,  
5 coupled with generational poverty and a lack of access to resources, make it extraordinarily difficult  
6 for persons with convictions to enter the newly regulated industry.

7 (4) Offering technical support, regulatory compliance assistance, and assistance with  
8 securing the capital necessary to begin a business will further the stated intent of this act by reducing  
9 barriers to licensure and employment in the regulated industry.

10 (5) Offering these supports will also aid the state in its goal of eliminating or reducing the  
11 illicit cannabis market by bringing more people into the legal marketplace.

12 (6) It is the intent of the general assembly in enacting this act to ensure that persons most  
13 harmed by cannabis criminalization and poverty be offered assistance to enter the multibillion  
14 dollar cannabis industry as entrepreneurs or as employees with high quality, well-paying jobs.

15 (7) It is the intent of the general assembly in enacting this act that the cannabis industry be  
16 representative of the state's population, and that barriers to entering the industry are reduced  
17 through support to those most in need.

18 (8) The general assembly finds and declares that this act furthers the purposes and intent  
19 of the Edward O. Hawkins and Thomas C. Slater Medical Marijuana Act and prospectively will  
20 reduce barriers in the future as Rhode Island contemplates legalization of cannabis.

21 **21-28.11-3. Definitions.**

22 For purposes of this chapter, the following definitions apply:

23 (1) "Areas of disproportionate impact" means geographical areas that, due to statute, policy  
24 or other law, have been adversely affected more than other areas within the same municipality or  
25 state.

26 (2) "Eligible local jurisdiction" means a city or town in Rhode Island that has adopted or  
27 operates a local equity program.

28 (3) "Local equity applicant" means an applicant who has submitted, or will submit, an  
29 application to a local jurisdiction to engage in commercial cannabis activity within the municipal  
30 boundaries of that jurisdiction and who meets the requirements of that jurisdiction's local equity  
31 program.

32 (4) "Local equity licensee" means a person who has obtained a license from a local  
33 jurisdiction to engage in commercial cannabis activity within the municipal boundaries of that  
34 jurisdiction and who meets the requirements of that jurisdiction's local equity program.

1 (5) "Local equity program" means a program adopted or operated by a local jurisdiction  
2 that focuses on inclusion and support of individuals and communities in Rhode Island's cannabis  
3 industry who are linked to populations or neighborhoods that were negatively or disproportionately  
4 impacted by cannabis criminalization. Local equity programs may include, but are not limited to,  
5 the following types of services:

6 (i) Small business support services offering technical assistance to those persons from  
7 economically disadvantaged communities that experience high rates of poverty or communities  
8 most harmed by cannabis prohibition, determined by historically high rates of arrests or convictions  
9 for cannabis law violations;

10 (ii) Tiered fees or fee waivers for cannabis-related permits and licenses;

11 (iii) Assistance in paying state regulatory and licensing fees;

12 (iv) Assistance securing business locations prior to or during the application process;

13 (v) Assistance securing capital investments;

14 (vi) Assistance with regulatory compliance;

15 (vii) Assistance in recruitment, training, and retention of a qualified and diverse workforce,  
16 including transitional workers.

17 (6) "Transitional worker" means a person who, at the time of starting employment at the  
18 business premises, resides in a zip code or census tract area with higher than average  
19 unemployment, crime, or child death rates, and faces at least one of the following barriers to  
20 employment:

21 (i) Is homeless;

22 (ii) Is a custodial single parent;

23 (iii) Is receiving public assistance;

24 (iv) Lacks a GED or high school diploma;

25 (v) Has a criminal record or other involvement with the criminal justice system;

26 (vi) Suffers from chronic unemployment;

27 (vii) Is emancipated from the foster care system;

28 (viii) Is a veteran; or

29 (ix) Is over sixty-five (65) years of age and is financially compromised.

30 **21-28.11-4. Establishment of board.**

31 (a) The general assembly shall establish a board for the purpose of overseeing local equity  
32 programs. The board shall have five (5) members, three (3) of whom shall be appointed by the  
33 speaker of the house of representatives and two (2) of whom shall be appointed by the senate  
34 president. Two (2) members of the board shall have experience in cultivating cannabis; one shall

1 have experience in operating or managing a retail or wholesale business; one shall have experience  
2 in banking and financing; and, one shall have experience in law enforcement and shall be  
3 designated as the compliance agent of the board.

4 (b) The board shall oversee the distribution of all grants, loans and monies appropriated by  
5 the general assembly for use in establishing and supporting applicants to local equity programs.

6 (c) The board may, upon request by a local jurisdiction, provide technical assistance to a  
7 local equity program that helps local equity applicants or local equity licensees. When determining  
8 whether to provide technical assistance, the board shall make individual determinations based on  
9 the reasonableness of the request and available resources.

10 (d) "Technical assistance" includes providing training and educational sessions regarding  
11 state cannabis licensing processes and requirements to equity applicants or equity licensees that are  
12 coordinated with the local equity program.

13 **21-28.11-5. Board review of applications.**

14 (a)(1) Upon appropriation of funds by the general assembly, an eligible local jurisdiction  
15 may, in the form and manner prescribed by the board, submit an application to the board for a grant  
16 to assist local equity applicants and local equity licensees through that local jurisdiction's equity  
17 program.

18 (2) The board shall review an application based on the following factors:

19 (i) Whether the local jurisdiction is an eligible local jurisdiction;

20 (ii) Whether the local jurisdiction has adopted or operates a local equity program;

21 (iii) Whether the local jurisdiction has identified a local equity applicant or a local equity  
22 licensee that the local jurisdiction could assist, as defined in subsection (b) of this section, through  
23 use of the grant funding;

24 (iv) Whether the local jurisdiction has demonstrated the ability to provide, or created a plan  
25 to provide, the services identified in subsection (b) of this section;

26 (v) The number of existing and potential local equity applicants and local equity licensees  
27 in the local jurisdiction;

28 (vi) Priority shall be given to those applicants that:

29 (A) Have resided in areas of disproportionate impact for five (5) of the last ten (10) years,  
30 or

31 (B) Have resided in Rhode Island for twenty-four (24) months, and have a prior conviction  
32 under chapter 28 of title 21, or

33 (C) Have resided in Rhode Island for twenty-four (24) months, and have a parent or spouse  
34 with a prior drug-related conviction.

1 (vii) Any additional relevant and reasonable criteria the board deems necessary.

2 (3) The board shall grant funding to an eligible local jurisdiction based on its review of the  
3 factors in subsection (a)(2) of this section. If applications for funding are greater than the amount  
4 appropriated for this grant program, the board shall prorate the funding among the qualified  
5 applicants.

6 (b) An eligible local jurisdiction that receives a grant pursuant to subsection (a) of this  
7 section shall use grant funds to assist local equity applicants and local equity licensees in that local  
8 jurisdiction to gain entry to, and to successfully operate in, the state's regulated cannabis  
9 marketplace. For purposes of this section, "assist" includes, but is not limited to, any of the  
10 following methods:

11 (1) To provide a loan or a grant to a local equity applicant or local equity licensee to assist  
12 the applicant or licensee with startup costs. For purposes of this section, "startup costs" include, but  
13 are not limited to, rent, leases, local and state application and licensing fees, regulatory adherence,  
14 testing of cannabis, equipment, capital improvements, and training and retention of a qualified and  
15 diverse workforce, provided that no one applicant shall receive more than fifty thousand dollars  
16 (\$50,000) in financial assistance.

17 (2) To support local equity program efforts to provide sources of capital to local equity  
18 applicants and local equity licensees.

19 (3) To provide direct technical assistance to local equity applicants and local equity  
20 licensees.

21 (4) To assist in the administration of local equity programs.

22 (c) An eligible local jurisdiction that receives a grant pursuant to subsection (a) of this  
23 section shall, on or before January 1 of the year following receipt of the grant and annually  
24 thereafter for each year that grant funds are expended, submit an annual report to the board that  
25 includes all of the following information:

26 (1) How the local jurisdiction disbursed grant funds;

27 (2) How the local jurisdiction identified local equity applicants or local equity licensees,  
28 including how the local jurisdiction determines who qualifies as a local equity applicant or local  
29 equity licensee;

30 (3) The number of local equity applicants and local equity licensees that were served by  
31 the grant funds; and

32 (4) Demographic data on equity applicants, equity licensees, and other applicants and  
33 licensees in the jurisdiction, including, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation,  
34 income level, prior convictions, and veteran status. This information will be consolidated and

1 reported without the individual's identifying information.

2 (d) An eligible local jurisdiction that receives a grant pursuant to this section shall use no  
3 more than ten percent (10%) of the state grant for administration, including employing staff or  
4 hiring consultants to administer grants and the program.

5 **21-28.11-6. Duties of board.**

6 To facilitate greater equity in business ownership and employment in the cannabis market,  
7 the board shall:

8 (1) Serve as a point of contact for local equity programs;

9 (2) On or before July 1, 2022, publish approved local equity ordinances and model local  
10 equity ordinances created by the board with input from cannabis advocacy groups and zoning  
11 officials from participating municipalities. Advocacy groups may also include, but are not limited  
12 to, minority business owners and entrepreneurs, organizations with expertise in addressing barriers  
13 to employment and licensure for low-income communities or persons with prior arrests or  
14 convictions, and unions representing cannabis workers; and

15 (3) To the extent feasible, coordinate with the relevant local jurisdictions to carry out the  
16 responsibilities described in this section.

17 **21-28.11-7. Reporting requirements.**

18 (a) On or before July 1, 2023, the board shall submit a report to the general assembly  
19 regarding the progress of local equity programs that have received funding.

20 (b) The report shall include, but is not limited to, the following information:

21 (1) The cities and towns that have enacted local equity programs;

22 (2) The number of local equity applicants and general applicants applying for and receiving  
23 licenses in the jurisdictions that received grants; and

24 (3) Information collected from all jurisdictions and applicants including profit and loss  
25 statements, the number of employees of each applicant, the average weekly wage and benefits  
26 provided to each employee and an accounting of any funds reimbursed to the local equity program  
27 by the applicants.

28 (c) The board shall post the report required by this section and it shall be available upon  
29 request under § 38-2-1 et. seq.

30 **21-28.11-8. Use of funds.**

31 Funds realized from the imposition of fees and taxes in accordance with this chapter shall  
32 be directed back into the areas of disproportionate impact to fund the communities' schools, after  
33 school programs, community centers, or programs offering diversion for children, training and  
34 support for successful re-entry of convicted felons to their community.

1           **21-28.11-9. Expungement.**

2           (a) Any individual who is an applicant for a loan or grant under this chapter who has a prior  
3 conviction for a cannabis offense, which is no longer a criminal offense, shall be entitled to have  
4 such criminal conviction expunged pursuant to § 12-1.3-1, et seq.

5           (b) Any prior convictions for misdemeanor or felony possession of marijuana shall be  
6 included as eligible for expungement under subsection (a) of this section.

7           (c) Any individual who has been incarcerated as a result of a cannabis offense shall have  
8 all fees waived with respect to this section.

9           **21-28.11-10. Severability.**

10          The provisions of this chapter are severable. If any provision of this chapter or its  
11 application is held invalid, that invalidity shall not affect other provisions or applications that can  
12 be given effect without the invalid provision or application.

13          SECTION 2. This act shall take effect upon passage.

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EXPLANATION  
BY THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL  
OF

A N A C T

RELATING TO FOOD AND DRUGS-THE RHODE ISLAND CANNABIS EQUITY ACT

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1           This act would establish a board and appropriates funds from the legislature to create a  
2 local cannabis equity program to allow those people who want to enter the business of selling  
3 marijuana with state funding and technical assistance to do so.

4           This act would take effect upon passage.

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