February Newsletter

Marijuana Legalization Efforts Underway in New York and New Mexico

DPA is driving campaigns to legalize marijuana in New York and New Mexico – two states where we have a long history of fighting to reform drug policy. These legalization efforts are notable because they not only disrupt arrests for use and possession of marijuana, but also comprehensively address the harms of prior criminalization and are centered in justice.

Smart START NY is a DPA-led campaign to end racially biased and unjust enforcement of marijuana prohibition in the state of New York. It was convened by DPA in partnership with groups dedicated to creating a new, well-regulated, and inclusive marijuana industry that is rooted in racial and economic justice.

Governor Andrew Cuomo has said that legalization is a priority for him this legislative session. While we welcome his engagement on marijuana reform, we know that it’s vital for New York to legalize marijuana the right way. New York can be a working model for marijuana legalization across the country, but that requires more robust social equity and community reinvestment provisions than are in the Governor’s current proposal.

Smart START NY is championing a bill in the state legislature, the Marijuana Regulation and Taxation Act, that goes further than Gov. Cuomo’s framework and would reinvest tax revenue into communities harmed by the war on drugs. It would include more comprehensive social equity licensing, create an incubator program for social equity licensees and small businesses, and provide comprehensive expungement and resentencing/reclassification for those impacted by marijuana criminalization.

DPA is also campaigning to pass a holistic legalization bill in New Mexico this year. With unprecedented bipartisan support, our Grow New Mexico campaign is advocating for a marijuana legalization bill that will not only increase economic opportunities, but also provide retroactive justice to people criminalized for
marijuana, create an accessible, diverse, and inclusive industry, and ensure that tax revenue is reinvested into communities impacted by prohibition.

Drug Decriminalization in Oregon Has Officially Begun

On February 1, Oregon became the first state in the U.S. to decriminalize the possession of small amounts of all drugs and greatly increase access to treatment, recovery, harm reduction, and other services.

This is a result of a successful ballot initiative spearheaded by Drug Policy Action – the advocacy arm of the Drug Policy Alliance – in partnership with long-standing Oregon allies, that was approved by voters in the November 2020 election by a 17-point margin. The change represents a substantial shift in America’s half-century-long war on drugs that has led to the criminalization and punishment of millions and has disproportionately harmed communities of color.

“Today, the first domino of our cruel and inhumane war on drugs has fallen – setting off what we expect to be a cascade of other efforts centering health over criminalization,” said Kassandra Frederique, DPA’s Executive Director. “Over the last year, we have been painfully reminded of the harms that come from drug war policing and the absence of necessary health services and other support systems in our communities. Today, Oregon shows us that a better, more just world is possible.”

According to a report by the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission released by the Oregon Secretary of State’s office, the new law will result in a 95% decrease in racial disparities in drug arrests. The actual impact on disparities could be even more dramatic, the report notes, stating “other disparities can exist at different stages of the criminal justice process, including inequities in police stops, jail bookings, bail, pretrial detention, prosecutorial decisions, and others.”

The fundamental elements of the new law are based on successful models used in other parts of the United States and around the world – including Portugal and Switzerland – but tailored specifically to meet the needs of Oregonians. DPA worked in consultation with many Oregonians involved in public health, treatment, recovery, equity, economics, criminal justice, civil liberties, and more to craft the measure.
Learn more.

Call to Action: Decriminalize Drugs and Dismantle the Drug War

The war on drugs is a catastrophic failure. We can’t end it until we stop arresting and locking people up simply for using or possessing drugs.

Ending criminal penalties for drug possession, often referred to as decriminalization, means nobody gets arrested, goes to jail or prison, or faces criminal punishment for possessing a small amount of a drug for personal use.

Oregon made history when it became the first U.S. state to decriminalize all drugs. For the first time ever, we’re seeing real momentum at both the state and federal level. Now we need you to help us take the next step.

Sign the petition to demand an end to the criminalization of people who use drugs.

DPA Clips, Podcasts, and Stories

FEATURED POST: DPA's Executive Director, Kassandra Frederique, on the Mehdi Hasan Show
Law enforcement should not be dealing with drugs, says @Kassandra_Fred: "This is a health issue. We are in the middle of an enormous overdose crisis," she says. "We cannot arrest our way out of this problem... we actually have to make our policy interventions reflect that."

Watch the clip on Twitter.

Follow Kassandra on Twitter.

DPA Elects Former NYC Health Commissioner Dr. Mary T. Bassett & Criminal Justice Reform Advocate Kemba Smith to Its Board of Directors

DPA has appointed former New York City Health Commissioner Dr. Mary T. Bassett and criminal justice reform advocate and author Kemba Smith to its board of directors, where they will both serve three-year terms.

With more than 30 years of experience in public health, Dr. Mary Bassett has dedicated her career to advancing health equity. She is the Director of the François-Xavier Bagnoud (FXB) Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard University and the FXB Professor of the Practice of Health and Human Rights at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. Prior to joining the FXB Center, she served as New York City's Commissioner of Health from 2014 to 2018.
Originally from New York City, Dr. Bassett lived in Zimbabwe for nearly 20 years, where she served on the medical faculty of the University of Zimbabwe. She also worked as the Program Director for the African Health Initiative and the Child Well-being Program at the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, and as Deputy Commissioner for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

**Kemba Smith** is a well-known advocate for criminal justice reform, the author of *Poster Child*, and the founder of the **Kemba Smith Foundation**. Over the last 20 years, Kemba has lobbied senior officials at the White House, the United Nations, and the U.S. Congress. In 2019, she was appointed to the Virginia Parole Board and she continues to serve on the Virginia Criminal Sentencing Commission. She has also led trainings for federal and state probation organizations across the country and has received numerous awards.

Kemba’s advocacy stems from her own experience of being given a 24-and-a-half-year mandatory minimum sentence in federal prison – when she was seven months pregnant and having no prior criminal record – for conspiracy to participate in her boyfriend’s drug activities. After drawing support from around the nation, her sentence was commuted by President Clinton in December 2000, after she had served six and a half years.

*Read more.*

**Statement on the Inauguration of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris**

In response to the presidential inauguration of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, **Maritza Perez**, Director of the Office of National Affairs at DPA, released the following statement:
"Today is a beacon of hope for our most neglected communities – including people who use drugs and our incarcerated populations.

As Joe Biden and Kamala Harris take office, our country is dealing with record overdose deaths exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, where jails and prisons have become the biggest COVID hotspots, and the public is increasingly aware of the racial inequalities that exist within our judicial system and that are largely driven by the war on drugs.

None of these things will be resolved easily or overnight, however, we are confident the Biden-Harris Administration understands their urgency and look forward to working with them to find solutions centered in health over criminalization.

If the most recent election showed us anything, it is that Americans – on both sides of the aisle – want a more compassionate, health-based approach to drugs over the punitive and racist systems of the past."

*DPA has released a list of priorities that we are urging the Biden-Harris Administration to prioritize, particularly during its first 100 days in office.*

**Drug Policy in the News**

*Vice:* How New York Quietly Ended Its Street Drug War.

*Latino USA:* Decriminalizing the War on Drugs

*Washington Post:* Biden, once a Warrior in the ‘War on Drugs,’ May Slowly Retreat

*Ford Foundation:* Kassandra Frederique is Reimagining the Future of Drug Policy in America

*Filter:* What Harm Reductionists Want from Biden’s “Drug Czar”

*TalkingDrugs:* In Brazil, Bolsonaro Continues to Pump Blood to the War on Drugs
Put DPA in your will or estate plan. Find out more about how to join The Ashawna Hailey Planned Giving Society today.

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