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Cannabis License Equity Plan Passes the House

Illinois' retail cannabis industry would diversify under a bill passed this week that aims to correct a flawed license lottery system that has prevented minority residents from being able to open businesses.

Like the War on Drugs, the rollout of cannabis licenses has disproportionately impacted communities of color. We now have an opportunity to correct the missteps of the original lottery process by refocusing on the intent of the legalization bill. Instead of allowing the wealthy few to maintain control of this new industry, let's give people in areas that have been left behind a real opportunity to start a local business that is owned and operated by members of the community.

"Today's vote puts us on a more equitable path forward, and I want to thank Representative Ford and everyone involved for their hard work to implement a fair process open to every community," said Speaker Emanuel "Chris" Welch. "It's important that the legislature monitors the progress of this industry in Illinois and continue to be prepared to act as necessary."

With my House Bill 1443, 110 new cannabis licenses would be awarded through two lotteries targeted toward Black, Hispanic and other minority residents of disproportionately impacted areas. As part of the qualifying criteria, one of the lotteries would prioritize those previously arrested or convicted of previous cannabis-related offenses. The new licenses would be in addition to a batch of 75 licenses intended to have been released in 2020 that have been delayed due to litigation and issues with the selection process' scoring system.

Along with guiding the new selection process, this bill helps to clean up the state's cannabis legalization law by expanding diversity on the state's Restore, Reinvest and Renew (R3) oversight board and increasing medical cannabis purchase access for patients, among other fixes to rollout concerns. Through emails, phone calls, hearings, and community discussions, we have listened to hundreds of concerned residents throughout the process of formulating this legislation.

As expected, the cannabis industry has been and will continue to be very lucrative. It's important as we continue to distribute licenses that we keep track of ownership data and ensure nobody is left behind. I'm hopeful that this proposal will put us on a more equitable path this year. House Bill 1443 now heads to the Senate for consideration. Please contact me at repford@lashawnford.com with your comments.

Sincerely,

La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District