DPFH WELCOMES LEGISLATIVE EFFORT TO ENCOURAGE SUSTAINABLE & JUST ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES VIA LEGALIZATION OF ADULT-USE CANNABIS

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HONOLULU, HI – Tomorrow morning Hawaii’s Senate Judiciary Committee will hold the first hearing on adult-use cannabis legalization in half a decade. DPFH, which conducted a single-question survey of candidates and officeholders last summer on adult-use cannabis legalization, will provide testimony on the bill. DPFH also intends to be an active participant in an ongoing constructive and comprehensive public dialogue over cannabis policy.

The beneficial prospects of legal adult-use cannabis sales stand in stark contrast to the current regime of cannabis prohibition, which disproportionately affects those already facing numerous socioeconomic challenges, misallocates law enforcement resources, and distracts from more urgent public health priorities. For example, arrest data for cannabis possession for personal use over the past decade show that Native Hawaiian and Filipino kama‘aina are disproportionately impacted by the status quo. Even a misdemeanor conviction carries over 100 “collateral consequences” that impacts a person’s ability to obtain housing, education, and employment. Cannabis prohibition also carries significant costs to the criminal justice system by providing a basis for extended probation and parole unrelated to the risks posed to the community, often resulting in a return to jail or prison.

Experiences in other states show that a legal adult-use cannabis market is workable and preferable to one where illicit transactions involving questionable products go untaxed and unregulated. Forecasts regarding generated revenue proved to be too conservative while the concerns regarding increased youth use and impaired driving appear to have been overblown. Tax-and-regulate states demonstrate that legislators and other stakeholders can work together to devise a just and equitable system. Legislation that authorizes this new marketplace will create local businesses opportunities, fashion job opportunities for kama‘aina, and invite
increased capital investment in Hawaii’s economy. A regulated market will also supplant illicit transactions that now result in zero tax revenue to the state by providing tested, reliable cannabis products for consumers in licensed businesses staffed by members of the community.

Ongoing legislative deliberations and public discussions should consider the social justice ethos of California’s law and the bills being discussed currently in other state legislatures like New Jersey and New York. Foremost, this entails including mechanisms to right the wrongs done to the most disparately impacted communities by this criminalization and to chart an inclusive path forward.

The following statement is attributable to Carl Bergquist, Executive Director of DPFH: “I look forward to testifying tomorrow and to listening to what others have to say. So much has happened in the cannabis landscape since that last hearing in February 2014, and I am hopeful that we have moved beyond clichés, stereotypes and tropes about the ‘devil weed’ and ‘reefer madness.’ Instead, we can truly focus on making this legalization equitable for all of Hawaii, most importantly for those most disparately impacted by this criminalization. This means clearing charges, expunging records, community reinvestment and working to ensure that a nascent cannabis industry is not one where the only people who do not profit are the ones who suffered from the criminalization of cannabis in the first place. DPFH is committed to taking concerns seriously, and to working with interested parties to address them.”

DPFH Board President Nikos Leverenz added, “It’s an opportune time for Hawaii to join the community of states who have legalized, taxed, and regulated adult-use cannabis. As those states and Canada have shown, an emerging cannabis industry can provide many sustainable local business opportunities that produce quality jobs for kama’aina, provide quality products for consumers, and generate tax revenues for the state. Hopefully the legislature will also consider the social justice implications of the current regime of cannabis prohibition and take necessary measures to repair institutional harms that have been perpetuated over time. In short, a just and equitable system of adult-use regulation should invite broad economic participation from those who have been marginalized through decades of overcriminalization and overincarceration.”

NOTE: On Thursday, January 31 at 8pm, Leverenz will appear on PBS Insights to discuss cannabis legalization with State Representative Joy San Buenaventura (D-Puna), Dr. William Haning of the UH School of Medicine and Greg Tjakpes of the Coalition for a Drug-Free Hawaii.