**Diversity of medical marijuana dispensary owners in D.C. increased in 2019**

Medical marijuana has been legal in Washington, D.C., for over 20 years. But up until this year, only one of five medical marijuana dispensaries in D.C. was owned by a person of color.

After Anacostia Organics and Cannabliss opened this year, that number jumped to three out of seven medical marijuana dispensaries owned by a person of color, making the percentage of medical marijuana dispensaries owned by people of color almost 50 percent.

According to a survey conducted by Marijuana Business Daily in 2017, 19 percent of respondents who launched a marijuana business and/or have an ownership stake in a marijuana company are racial minorities, over half of whom identify as Hispanic, Latino or African-American.

Karen O’Keefe, director of state policies for the Marijuana Policy Project, attributed the uptick in minority-owned dispensaries in D.C. this year to the fact that racial disparity has just recently become more apparent.

“The industry is not as diverse as it should or could be,” she said. “I can tell you anecdotally that the industry is disproportionately white and male, but we don’t have much hard data on it.”

*[line graph: number of dispensaries in D.C. over time (every 3 years since 1998)]*

*[bar graph: number of dispensaries in D.C. owned by POC over time (every year since 2015)]*

O’Keefe said early laws did not include much that explicitly worked to ensure diversity in the industry, but, in the last few years, many states have recognized the issue and passed initiatives to address racial disparity and promote inclusion.

For example, Illinois’ new marijuana legalization bill this year has racial justice provisions that aim to promote diversity in the largely white industry. The law includes a social equity program that will provide grants and loans to minority marijuana business owners.

“These changes are pretty recent, but the marijuana industry itself is pretty recent,” she said.

There are a number of reasons for this racial disparity when it comes to medical marijuana dispensaries. First of all, there is the high cost of launching a marijuana business, exacerbated by the fact that the industry is so highly regulated, which deters people of color, O’Keefe said.

Moreover, marijuana businesses do not have access to banking services like loans, because the drug is still federally illegal, so it is very difficult for people from low-income backgrounds, who are often people of color, to start a business, O’Keefe explained.

O’Keefe added that the average per capita wealth is much lower as a whole for African-Americans due to the legacy of oppression in the U.S.

It is also likely that people of color are more reluctant to openly commit a felony by opening a medical marijuana dispensary. “People of color might be targeted more than their white counterparts, and fear could be holding them back,” O’Keefe said.

A 2013 report by the American Civil Liberties Union showed that blacks were eight times more likely than whites to be arrested for marijuana possession in D.C., even though they were not more likely to use or sell the drug. According to the report, the District’s racial disparity in marijuana possession arrest rates was above the national average.

Current marijuana laws also shut out non-U.S. citizens, unless they are willing to take a risk that could be devastating to them and their families, O’Keefe said.

“If someone applying for a green card admits to being involved in the marijuana industry, they could be denied a green card or even denied entry back into the country,” she explained.

Despite these challenges, O’Keefe said almost every state that’s currently considering legalization is looking into diversity and inclusion strategies. And if D.C. passes a bill legalizing recreational marijuana, she said she is confident the city will include measures to benefit diversity.

Later this year, the D.C. Council will likely start discussing a bill introduced by Mayor Muriel Bowser in May that would legalize recreational marijuana sales. A separate bill from D.C. At-large Councilmember David Grosso would direct revenues to communities impacted by the war on drugs and expunge the records of anyone convicted of a nonviolent marijuana offense in the past.

Of the three medical marijuana dispensaries owned by a person of color in D.C., National Holistic Healing Center in DuPont Circle has been around the longest. The owner and general manager, Chanda Macias, MBA, PhD, a black and Latina woman, opened the dispensary in 2015.

Anacostia Organics, which opened in February, became the first medical marijuana dispensary east of the Anacostia River. The owner Linda Greene, a Native American and Filipino woman, is a member of the Minority Cannabis Business Association and chair of the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Task Force for the Cannabis Trade Federation.

It took six years of research, networking and finally finding a landlord who was willing to lease a space to a marijuana business for Greene to launch Anacostia Organics.

“Most of us didn’t know this opportunity existed,” she explained. “You had to be in the know. Those who got the first licenses to open dispensaries were connected with other businesses already in the industry or with people who knew how to apply for licenses.”

Greene said that of the 15 licenses granted to operate in D.C., only two people of color were given licenses.

Greene said it is even more difficult for people of color to enter the industry, because they have been the most affected by the war on drugs, which was “created to punish minorities and to incarcerate them.”

Greene added that many who have been affected by the war on drugs now want to enter the legal marijuana industry, but they cannot because they have a record.

“This industry has moved so fast, so a lot of things still need to be perfected nationwide,” she said.