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Medical cannabis, justice, education top Black Caucus agenda

By Brianna Rhodes and Natalie Schwartz|AP January 11

ANNAPOLIS, Md. — The Maryland Black Caucus laid out their priorities for the 2017 General Assembly session, including diversifying the medical cannabis industry, eliminating the cash bail system and reforming education during a press conference Wednesday morning.

The caucus members outlined their plan to draft legislation that would encourage minority-owned businesses in Maryland's long-awaited medical marijuana industry.

Although Maryland lawmakers passed a law allowing private medical marijuana businesses in 2014, the Maryland Medical Cannabis Commission has not issued any final licenses to grow, process or dispense cannabis, according to its website.

However, the commission announced Dec. 9 it awarded pre-approvals for 102 businesses to sell medical cannabis, drawing from a pool of 811 applicants. None of the businesses selected is led by African-Americans.

“We will not accept the fact that the medical cannabis industry will be up and running in the state of Maryland with no minority participation,” said

Delegate Cheryl Glenn, D-Baltimore.

The caucus wants to overhaul the 15-member commission to ensure racial and geographical diversity are considered going forward, Glenn said, adding this measure wouldn't further delay access to medical cannabis.

"This is an emergency legislation to be passed through both houses in a matter of days and on the desk of the governor to be signed into law to be enacted immediately," Glenn said Wednesday.

The caucus is also fighting to reform the state's cash bail system. The state's current money-based system can set unaffordable amounts for many poor defendants, leaving them to await trial in jail, said Douglas Colbert, a University of Maryland law professor. The system often disproportionately affects the lives of the working poor and minorities in the state, Colbert added.

The Maryland Court of Appeals considered Jan. 5 a change to the current system by ordering judges to set bail at a cost the defendant will be able to afford.

"Money should never decide whether people regain their freedom or stay in jail," Colbert said. "We have people who are a part of a pretrial population waiting for trial who are there for one reason only. They don't have the money to pay the bondsman a 10 percent fee and they don't have the financial resources to post for bail."

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Caucus members announced they would also focus on increasing public safety by creating more transparency between police officers and the general public.

The black caucus also plans to push for increased prescription drug affordability by introducing legislation that would allow the attorney general to fight price gouging, said Vincent DeMarco, president of Maryland Citizen's Health Initiative.

Regarding education, the caucus issued its support of a lawsuit that asserts students who attend historically black colleges continue to face violations of their rights and segregation within higher education. They are seeking remedies to solve the issues, which will continue to take place in the next few weeks, Delegate Charles Sydnor, D-Baltimore County, said.

Caucus members said they also intend to ban pre-K suspensions and return of control of the Baltimore City Public Schools System to the Baltimore City government.

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