

Written by Kathy
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Pictured is Ohio 11th Congressional District Congresswoman Shontel M. Brown, a Warrensville Hts. Democrat whose largely Black congressional district includes Cleveland

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By Kathy Wray Coleman, associate publisher, editor

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Ohio 11th Congressional District Congresswoman Shontel M. Brown (O H-11), a Warrensville Heights Democrat whose largely Black congressional district includes Cleveland and several of its eastern suburbs in Cuyahoga County, voted for the Marijuana Opportunity Reinvestment and Expungement (MORE) Act. It passed the Democratically-controlled U.S. House of Representatives 220-204 on Friday and now heads to a battle in a 50-50 Senate, a senate that rejected a similar legislative proposal two years ago when Republicans were in the majority.

If ultimately passed by Congress, the comprehensive federal legislation, which was introduced by Rep Jerrold Nadler, a Democrat out of New York, would, in short, decriminalize marijuana at the federal level. Passed largely along party lines, the bill requires a federal tax on marijuana sales that would start at five percent and eventually increase to eight percent over a five year period. And it would remove marijuana from the list of federally controlled substances and eliminates federal criminal penalties.

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Brown says the bill is an attempt by Congress to tackle the injustices marijuana has had on communities of color, particularly relative to the nation's racist and unjust legal system and its disproportionate effect on America's Black community.

"Decades upon decades of failed, discriminatory drug policies have directly harmed Black and Brown communities," said Rep Brown on Friday. "Even today, some Americans serve harsh sentences for marijuana use, while others make millions in profit off of the industry."

The congresswoman, one of two Blacks in Congress from Ohio, went on to say that "the MORE Act would right this historical wrong by decriminalizing marijuana," and that "today, I am proud to cast my vote to decriminalize marijuana and bring us one important step closer to justice."

Then a Cuyahoga County councilwoman, Brown handily won election last November over Republican Lavern Jones Gore to replace former congresswoman Marcia L. Fudge until a regular election could be held, and to serve out Fudge's unexpired two year congressional term. Fudge vacated her congressional seat in March of 2021 to become secretary of housing and urban development with President Joe Biden's administration, a seat that remained vacant until Brown won the special election in November to replace her.

Congresswoman Brown faces former Ohio senator Nina Turner for a May 3 rematch of a primary held last year that she, then a Fudge protege and chairperson of the Cuyahoga County Democratic Party, won over nine other Democratic candidates, including Turner, her closest opponent whom she narrowly defeated, though last's year primary election was a special election and this year's is a regular primary.

If she wins next month's Democratic primary, Brown will face independent journalist and former East Cleveland mayor Eric Brewer, a Democrat-turned-Republican, for a Nov 8 general election. Cuyahoga County and Cleveland are Democratic strongholds led primarily by Democratic public officials, and Ohio's 11th congressional district is overwhelmingly Democratic too.

Regardless of who wins, he or she will lead an 11th congressional district that will later be altered by new congressional redistricting maps, a map, in fact, that will likely include all and not most of Cleveland, and that no longer includes a predominantly Black pocket of Akron and

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some of its suburbs of Summit County. A 15-district congressional map approved by the Ohio Redistricting Commission in January was struck down by the Ohio Supreme court as favoring Republicans, and thus unconstitutional, and a subsequent map submitted to the court by the commission in March remains in dispute but will likely go forward on the May 3 ballot since the court will not hear the challenge until after that date.

Currently 9th Congressional District Congresswoman Marcy Kaptur, a Toledo Democrat and the longest serving woman in the U.S. House of Representatives, represents parts of Cleveland's largely White west side, and Brown, in addition to suburban territories in Cuyahoga and Summit counties and a small segment of Akron, Cleveland's largely Black east side.

While medical marijuana is legal in Ohio, recreational marijuana remains illegal. The recreational use of cannabis, however, has been legalized in 18 states, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and D.C, and another 13 states and the U.S. Virgin Islands have decriminalized its use.

Criminal justice reform advocates and some Black scholars say marijuana's deeply racist history is rooted in the need for comprehensive criminal justice reforms across the board.

The over-representation of Black Americans in the nation's justice system is well documented.

"Black men comprise about 13 percent of the male population, but about 35 percent of those incarcerated," [writes Dr. Elizabeth Hinton](#), a Black assistant professor in the Department of History and Department of African and African-American Studies at Harvard University.

"One in three Black men born today can expect to be incarcerated in his lifetime, compared to one in six Latino men and one in 17 white men," Hinton said. Black women are similarly impacted as one in 18 Black women born in 2001 is likely to be incarcerated sometime in her life, compared to one in 111 White women."

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Bias by decision makers at all stages of the justice process disadvantages Black people," Dr. Hinton argues. "Studies have found that they are more likely to be stopped by the police, detained pretrial, charged with more serious crimes, and sentenced more harshly than white people."

As federal lawmakers continue to debate whether to make recreational marijuana legal on the federal level, voters and state legislatures from across the country, aside from in the 18 states that have already legalized its recreational use, continue to confront the issue, one way or another.

Ohio lawmakers and the state's Republican-dominated state legislature have rejected proposed legislation to legalize recreational Marijuana under state law, and voters, in 2015, turned down a private citizens-led ballot initiative to approve recreational pot use in the state.

The city of Cleveland passed an ordinance in 2020 to decriminalize low-level possession of marijuana. It eliminates fines and jail time for possession of up to 200 grams, or just over seven ounces of marijuana.

By Kathy Wray Coleman, associate publisher, editor. Coleman is a seasoned Black Cleveland journalist who trained at the Call and Post Newspaper for 17 years and an experienced investigative and political reporter. She is the most read independent journalist in Ohio per Alexa.com

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