



NORTHWEST **WORKERS' JUSTICE** PROJECT

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Testimony in Support of SB 5505
, Northwest Workers' Justice Project
Corinna Spencer-Scheurich, Director
February 14, 2023

Dear Co-Chairs Sollman and Evans, and members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Public Safety:

Last year, Northwest Workers' Justice Project began to receive funds from CJC's Illegal Marijuana Market Enforcement Grant through a partnership of nonprofit organizations with the fiscal agent, Willamette Valley Law Project. The statewide partnership, called the Cannabis Workers Resilience Partnership, is an innovative and holistic response to the humanitarian crisis in the illegal cannabis industry.

While we only received the funding late last fall and are still working to hire all of the staff needed to do the planned work, we have already been able to support over 120 low wage and immigrant agricultural workers who were recruited into illegal cannabis, usually under false pretenses. We have barely scratched the surface of the work that needs to be done, and we have already heard countless stories of unsanitary and unsafe living conditions, threats of violence, and hundreds of thousands of dollars in wage theft.

We have worked with CJC to design and fund a truly exceptional service model. Community organizations—Unete in Medford and Centro de Servicios para Campesinos in Woodburn—act as humanitarian first responders. Unete, for example, has been called to law enforcement raids to pick up affected workers. Through the grant, Unete has provided emergency shelter, food and transportation. Other workers, many fearing for their lives and for those of their families, have sought out the Partnership for support and return home.

The workers also are connected with culturally specific mental health resources from Racias de Bienestar, another Partnership organization. Many of the workers we have spoken with have been trafficked, forced to work in grueling conditions without sufficient food or access to bathrooms, and abandoned without pay or a way to return to their communities. Trauma-informed counseling provides a path to resilience and recovery for abused workers.

Finally, all of the workers are connected to one of three Partnership legal organizations, Northwest Workers' Justice Project and the Farmworker Programs of Legal Aid Services of Oregon and Oregon Law Center. Attorneys have been helping workers navigate legal resources, including employment-based lawsuits, administrative agency complaints, and immigration support. The legal services are designed to find remedies for workers and to hold unscrupulous employers accountable whenever possible and safe to do so.

This spring, we are launching an outreach program designed to educate Oregon's traditional farmworker communities about the dangers we are seeing in the cannabis industry and ways that they can protect themselves. Entire communities are impacted by fear, instability, and impoverishment of public capacity and resources that the flourishing illegal marijuana industry creates. Through education and outreach, we hope to prevent exploitation and protect our client communities.

CJC has been a pragmatic and collaborative funder of our work. While initially a law enforcement grant fund, CJC has worked closely with the Partnership to pivot to including community grant funds directed at workers affected by the illegal cannabis crisis. On behalf of the Partnership, I urge to you support SB 5505 and continued funding for the important work of CJC and the Illegal Marijuana Market Enforcement Grant Program.