Testimony of Jennifer Thompson, MSW
before the Assembly Community Development and Affairs Committee
in Support of A1897
June 15, 2020

Madame Chairwoman and distinguished committee members, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on bill A1897. My name is Jennifer Thompson and I am the Executive Director of the National Association of Social Workers – NJ Chapter. We represent the interests of the more than 20,000 licensed social workers in NJ and the clients they dedicatedly serve. More than being the professional organization for social workers, we are also an organization—and a profession—ethically-charged to challenge social injustices and advocate on behalf of minority, marginalized, and under-represented populations.

Consistent with this mission and our support for a public health approach to marijuana and other drug use, NASW-NJ supports the decriminalization of marijuana and the expungement of existing related criminal records as a crucial step in our battle to dismantle institutionalized racism.

Research has shown the current criminal justice approach to regulating marijuana has not significantly curbed abuse of the drug, while at the same time differential application of criminal laws related to marijuana has caused great and disproportionate harm to people and communities of color.

According to a 2018 report published by the Drug Policy Alliance, there were 587,700 marijuana arrests in the U.S. in 2016—roughly 40 percent of all drug arrests. The vast majority (nearly 90 percent) of these arrests were for simple possession, not sale or manufacture. There are more arrests for marijuana possession every year than for all violent crimes combined.

Multiple reports show rates of marijuana usage are similar among different ethnic and racial groups. Despite the similarity in usage rates, an April report published by the ACLU revealed black males in New Jersey are nearly 3.5 times more likely to be arrested and convicted of low-level marijuana offenses than white persons.

The impact of these arrests can be devastating to individuals and families. A single low-level marijuana offense can bar a person from gainful employment, prevent them from obtaining federal financial, educational, or housing assistance, disqualify them from a wide range of occupational licenses, strip away the right to vote, and stigmatize them for years.

As we grapple with the intertwined pandemics of the novel coronavirus and institutional racism, the decriminalization of marijuana, coupled with expungement of records, will help us address both these issues. It will allow us to reduce prison populations, not only saving money, but slowing or preventing the spread of Covid-19 in our jails and prisons.
There will be fewer arrests and presumably fewer potentially combustible interactions between community members and police—which will help to prevent the ongoing disenfranchisement and marginalization of many persons, and particularly persons of color, related to drug possession, limiting the racially-tinged differential application of punishment related to drug possession—and will prioritize rehabilitation, safety, and well-being over said punishment for people who use drugs. Moreover, the expungement of existing criminal records will allow impacted persons to begin to reclaim and rebuild the lives they have lost.

Now is the time to act to address the harms and prevent further harms that have been done by the unsuccessful criminal justice approach to drug use and possession. I ask that you vote in support of A1897 so we can begin this important work.

I thank you for your time.