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National Black Police Association Supports California's Marijuana Legalization Initiative

Proposition 19, the marijuana legalization initiative, picked up the support Thursday of a national organization that represents African American police officers, as the campaign for legalization continues to try to build support in the black community and among law enforcement officials.

The National Black Police Assn., which has about 15,000 members, is the second African American organization to back the measure. The California NAACP has also endorsed it, citing the disproportionate arrest and incarceration of African Americans caught with marijuana.

Ron Hampton, the police association's executive director, said he decided the group should get behind the measure because it would eliminate laws that have a negative impact on the black community.

"It means that we will be locking up less African American men and women and children who are using drugs," said Hampton, a retired Washington, D.C., police officer with 25 years experience. "We've got more people in prison. We've got more young people in prison. Blacks go to jail more than whites for doing the same thing."

Hampton said that the money being spent on the war on drugs could be better spent on education, housing and creating jobs. "It just seemed like to me that we have been distracted in this whole thing," he said. "We can take that money, and focus and concentrate on things that really make a difference in our community."

Neill Franklin, a retired police officer and the executive director of Law Enforcement Against Prohibition, and Alice Huffman, the state NAACP's president, spoke on a panel at the black police association's conference in Sacramento on Thursday. "I saw with my own eyes the devastating impact these misguided marijuana laws have on our communities and neighborhoods," said Franklin, who is black and who worked in law enforcement for 33 years.

LEAP and the state NAACP are seeking to broaden support for Proposition 19, which would allow people 21 years old and over to grow marijuana and possess up to an ounce. LEAP announced the black police association's support Thursday in a news release. About 30 police officers and law enforcement officials in California have also endorsed the measure.

The state NAACP's support came as the Drug Policy Alliance, which supports legalization, released a report showing African Americans represent 22% of marijuana arrests even though they are less than 7% of the population. The action stirred up opposition among a group of black ministers who oppose the measure and who called for Huffman's ouster.