

An Overview of Rhode Island's Social Equity Assistance Program

The Rhode Island Cannabis Control Commission (Commission) developed this document to provide an overview of Rhode Island's Social Equity Assistance Program and the Social Equity Applicant Status Certification process established under the Rhode Island Cannabis Act. It introduces the purpose of the program, explains who may qualify as a Social Equity Applicant under the amended Rhode Island Cannabis Act (Cannabis Act), and summarizes the benefits available through the program.

This document is provided for educational and informational purposes only. It is not legal advice and does not replace the Rhode Island Cannabis Act, Commission regulations, or advice from qualified legal counsel.

The Social Equity Assistance Program

The Rhode Island General Assembly established the Social Equity Assistance Program to address the lasting effects of the criminal enforcement of cannabis laws and promote participation in Rhode Island's regulated cannabis industry. The 2026 amendments streamlined eligibility by removing jurisdiction specific criteria and focusing on individuals directly impacted by cannabis-related criminal enforcement.

This program is available both to new applicants as well as existing licensees who meet the qualifying criteria.

Social Equity Applicant Status Certification

Certification is the first step for individuals seeking a Social Equity retail cannabis establishment license. Certification establishes eligibility to participate in the licensing process but does not authorize the operation of a cannabis business.

Who May Qualify as a Social Equity Applicant?

A Social Equity Applicant must have at least 51 percent ownership and control by one or more individuals who have been disproportionately impacted by the criminal enforcement of cannabis laws. Qualifying individuals include those with qualifying cannabis-related arrests, convictions, or adjudications in Rhode Island and for qualifying equivalent offenses from another jurisdiction before May 25, 2022, or members of an impacted family.

Ownership and Control

“Ownership and control,” which will be referred to several times throughout this document, are fundamental components of the Cannabis Act which requires the Commission to evaluate not only who has an ownership interest in a proposed cannabis business, but also who possesses the authority to manage and direct the business’s day-to-day operations. As a result, ownership percentage alone is not sufficient to determine whether an applicant satisfies the statutory requirements for certification. The Commission must evaluate both ownership and operational control together.

Under the Cannabis Act, **“ownership and control”** means:

“Ownership of at least fifty-one percent (51%) of the cannabis establishment, and control over the management and day-to-day operations of the cannabis establishment, and an interest in the capital, assets, and profits and losses of the cannabis establishment proportionate to percentage of ownership.”

This statutory definition establishes several requirements that must be met simultaneously. Qualifying individuals must possess an ownership interest in the business, participate in the management and day-to-day operations of the cannabis establishment, and maintain a proportional interest in the business’s capital, assets, profits, and losses. The Commission evaluates these elements collectively when determining whether the statutory ownership and control requirement has been satisfied.

Program Benefits

Qualified applicants may have access to Social Equity Assistance Fund support, reduced licensing costs where authorized, and the opportunity to apply for reserved Social Equity retail licenses.

These benefits, including future opportunities for support from the Social Equity Assistance Fund, are available to both new applicants and existing licensees who meet the qualification criteria.

Before You Apply

Certification is only one step in the licensing process. Retail cannabis businesses require significant planning, capital, and ongoing compliance with state law. Certification does not guarantee licensure.

Learn More

Additional guidance is available through the Commission’s Technical Assistance Units and companion resources covering business structure and applicant certification.