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Written Testimony by Rev. Sarah Oglesby-Dunegan, Board Chair  
in Support of HB 2686, Marijuana Sentencing Reform  
House Corrections and Juvenile Justice Committee, Rep. J. Russell Jennings, chair  
February 18, 2020

Mr. Chairman, Ranking member Highberger, members of the committee:

My name is Rev. Sarah Oglesby-Dunegan. I serve as minister of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Topeka and as board chair of Kansas Interfaith Action, or KIFA, which I am representing here today in support of HB 2686. KIFA is a statewide, multi-faith issue advocacy organization that educates, engages and advocates on behalf of people of faith and the public regarding critical social, economic, and climate justice issues. We represent 2,000 people of faith and conscience (mostly Mainline Protestant, moderate Catholic, Jewish, Muslim and Unitarian Universalist) in Kansas. KIFA's goal is to bring a moral voice to issues of public policy in Kansas.

As communities of faith, our primary focus is on the intrinsic worth of the individual human being. Our priority is developing policy that helps ensure that our friends and neighbors—particularly those with economic or social disadvantages—have what they need to survive and thrive. For too many years, too many of our friends, family members and fellow citizens have been criminalized, their futures ruined, by ill-advised, punitive and racially disproportionate enforcement of marijuana laws. This is changing, finally, elsewhere in the country, and it's time for it to change in Kansas as well.

Marijuana criminalization has always been racialized. In 2010, Kansas ranked 13th highest in terms of the racial disparities in marijuana arrests. Black people in Kansas were 4.41 times more likely to be arrested for marijuana possession, despite the fact that Black and white people use and sell drugs and similar rates.

We have already significantly reformed the sentencing guidelines for marijuana possession. What makes HB 2686 unique is its retroactivity. This bill will allow us to turn previous marijuana felony convictions into misdemeanors. It's hard to overstate how important a reform this would be. It would allow people to escape a criminalized past, opening opportunities in housing, employment and education that they are kept from because they fell victim to an war on drugs that, against science and common sense, has treated marijuana the same as harder drugs. We know retroactivity might be a new concept to some of you, but we consider it to be the most important part of the bill. It will give people, caught up in an ill-advised, decades-long "war on drugs," a chance to begin to get their lives back. To put it into faith terms, it is nothing less than a chance for redemption.

All over the country, states are decriminalizing or legalizing marijuana. In our neighboring state, Kansas City Mayor Lucas is planning a pardon sweep for all marijuana possession convictions as well.

We can right a real wrong, and make real people's lives better, by passing HB 2686 – not next year, this year. For the sake of the dignity of our residents, for righting a real racial wrong, we urge you to recommend HB 2686 to the full House for passage.