



Source: County of Mendocino, CA

County of Mendocino

Cannabis Equity Assessment Report

July 2025



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County of Mendocino Cannabis Equity Assessment

Executive Summary

This chapter includes an executive summary overview of the project, high-level findings and recommendations for the updated Mendocino County Cannabis Equity Assessment. Included within is a summary overview of updates from the 2020 Cannabis Equity Assessment and showcases the 2025 Local Equity Entrepreneurial Program, services, resources and goals featured by the Cannabis Department.



Executive Summary

OVERVIEW

The 2020 Cannabis Equity Assessment (CEA) captured the historical chronology of the County's cannabis-related measures, identifying barriers and recommendations to address those barriers and issue. A demographic profile of the County was included in that report. As part of that 2020 CEA, there were also nine recommendations provided to the County. A procured vendor for Mendocino County (County) created a CEA in 2020 with the following three core goals:

1. *Provide a data-informed look at the history of impacts the prohibition and criminalization of cannabis had on the community*
2. *Provide policy recommendations to guide the county as it develops its Local Equity Plan and program activities which will help former disenfranchised community members successfully enter the legal cannabis workforce.*
3. *Make recommendations that will help assure that there is equity and diversity in the emerging cannabis industry.*

Beginning in 2024, the County engaged a procured vendor to conduct an update of the 2020 CEA with these differing objectives to develop the following:

1. *Executive summary and key findings*
2. *Cannabis equity program recommendations*
3. *Reporting of historical equity issues experienced by residents*
4. *Reporting of barriers to entry within the cannabis business*
5. *Additional research related to equity, inclusion, and economic development*

This updated CEA effort was tasked with identifying key findings, recommendations for the County cannabis Local Equity Entrepreneurial Program (LEEP), and to provide information on the historical equity issues, barriers to entry while also providing additional research related to equity, inclusion and economic development. However, this assessment does not feature an updated demographic profile for the County.

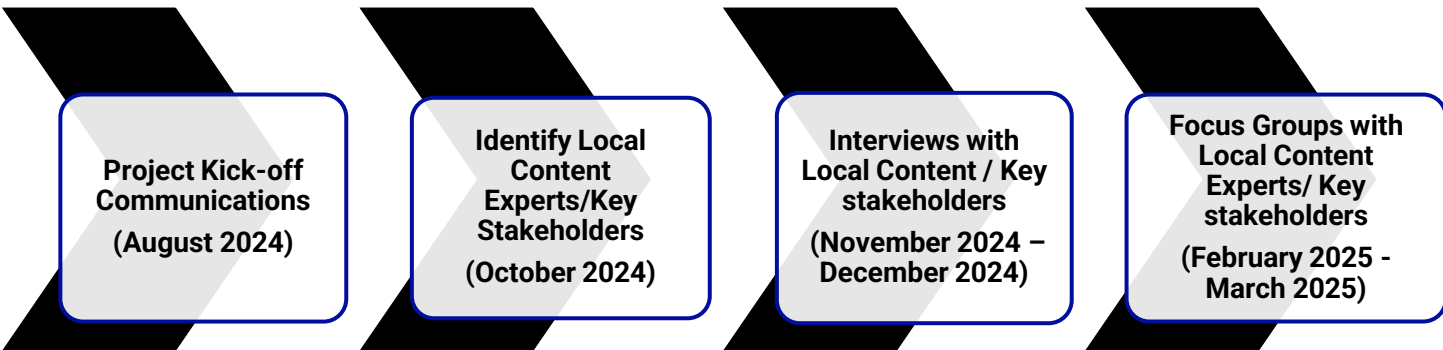
Several recommendations elevated upward from the public through this CEA process are noteworthy to consider; however, some will be constrained by State regulations for the County LEEP, budget constraints and resources. The County may reference these recommendations as a general guide to inform future considerations, as appropriate and as resources and circumstances allow.

Executive Summary

OVERVIEW (Continued)

A thorough review of key policy, programmatic documents, and other data were reviewed in the Fall of 2024. This review included the previous CEA developed in 2020. A program and policy gap review and analysis was developed that identified strengths and opportunity areas for improvement.

To gather critical insights and perspectives on the historical equity issues and barriers to entry in the LEEP program, a Stakeholder Engagement Plan was designed. The purpose of the Stakeholder Engagement Plan was to identify key stakeholders for interviews and focus groups to guide the County’s communication efforts about updates to the CEA. It was used to guide and direct outreach and qualitative engagement efforts to achieve stakeholder participation. Gathering input and perspectives of stakeholders was vital in developing CEA key findings and recommendations. A series of interviews and focus groups were conducted between November 2024 and February 2025 with key insights gathered that helped to inform both the findings and recommendations.



Synthesized findings were identified and summarized. This executive summary includes high-level findings and recommendations from the assessment. The full updated CEA report, however, includes an in-depth description of the project methodology, policy and programmatic gap analysis, qualitative analysis, recommendations and guidance on developing inclusive cannabis equity policies and program for the County.

Executive Summary

High-Level Findings

Below are the nine recommendations that came from the previous **2020 Cannabis Equity Assessment** and the current state status of implementation of those recommendations.

2020 CEA Recommendations	2025 Current State
1. Equity program eligibility factors should be focused on specific targeted populations most harmed by cannabis criminalization and poverty to reduce barriers to entry into the legal, regulated market. Eligibility criteria should be supported by data.	• This recommendation has been implemented. • Equity program and parameters are included in equity certification. Completely revamped the criteria that mirrors state demographics. • Includes applicant manuals and operating manuals. • Previous criteria contained a five-mile radius aspect to any Campaign Against Marijuana Planting (CAMP) raid. Data that was collected was deemed overly inclusive by the State and was not individualized. • Current location-based equity criteria is determined by the Department of Cannabis Control (DCC) “mapping tool” which includes census tract with supporting documentation. • Implemented rolling application system that is more streamlined, and all information is tracked through the equity certification process.
2. Ensure that applicants meeting equity program eligibility factors have adequate opportunity to take advantage of the program. Consider incentivizing ongoing support for equity applicants.	• This recommendation has been implemented. • The department helped strategically tier equity applicants for renewals. • This tiered system granted equity applicants additional time to prepare for renewals, including extending the amount of time in which license fees were due.
3. All peer jurisdictions who have implemented adult-use cannabis require data collection to understand the impact of the industry. CCRP recommends tracking data on general and equity applicants on an ongoing basis to measure the success of the equity program.	• This recommendation has been implemented. • This recommendation is closely tied to the quarterly reporting requirements with the grantor, the Governor’s Office of Business and Economic Development (Go-Biz). • An annual demographic survey is conducted, and data is shared with Go-Biz. This survey helps identify marginalized communities. This survey is open to all and includes information of respondents whether equity verified or not. The County has been receiving more responses each year.

High-Level Findings

CONTINUED

2020 CEA Recommendations	2025 Current State
4. Create specific services/programs for equity applicants that address/mitigate barriers to entering the legal cannabis market that address lack of access to capital, business space, technical support and regulatory compliance assistance.	• This recommendation has been implemented. Specific services have been implemented including the following: • Financial: Fee Relief and Direct Grant Program. • Administrative/Technical: Direct Technical Assistance program provided through procured vendor for verified equity applicants and additional support provided by Cannabis Department staff. • Business Acumen: Direct Technical Assistance program is developed and implemented. • Address Distrust in Government: County Cannabis Department implemented the weekly <i>CannaNotes Notification</i>, to help lower the level of distrust by providing consistent updates between to local cultivators, LEEP applicants and verified equity individuals. The Cannabis Department ensures the website is consistently updated with accurate and resourceful information. • General Government Committee Presentation: Monthly reports were regularly prepared and presented in a forum dedicated to cannabis-related issues, which welcomed discussion on all topics concerning cannabis. • Collaboration with Government Community: Posted opportunities for community members to provide feedback on how LEEP Round 5 funds were spent by using surveys, emails and phone calls. This collaboration allowed the community to provide feedback on how the Cannabis Equity Grant Funds were used. Feedback collected was published online (through charts and reporting). • Agriculture/Cultivation: Stronger interdepartmental support for cultivation processes in the County Cannabis Department.

Executive Summary

High-Level Findings

CONTINUED

2020 CEA Recommendations	2025 Current State
4. Create specific services/programs for equity applicants that address/mitigate barriers to entering the legal cannabis market that address lack of access to capital, business space, technical support and regulatory compliance assistance. (CONTINUED)	Implementation results observed from these recommendations include the following: • Direct Technical Assistance for METRC (California Cannabis Track-and-Trace) compliance. As a result, an increased level of comfort and understanding from the community was observed. • Additional knowledge sharing and increased efficiency and response levels with all County staff. • An increased number of local cultivators showing an interest in or making use of services that directly support or enhance their business knowledge and skills.
5. Continue using cannabis revenues collected by the County for community reinvestment programming to rebuild/restore communities adversely affected by the past criminalization of those involved in the cannabis industry.	• This recommendation has been partially implemented. • Cannabis Tax revenue collected in accordance with Measure AI and is expended in accordance with advisory Measure AJ. • Fee revenue is used to offset staff time for Cannabis Department functions. • Cannabis Business Tax Reductions: Reductions are in place for the cannabis business tax on cultivation and nursery operations for tax years 2025 and 2026.
6. All cannabis operators should provide equitable employment opportunities that provide a living wage. These opportunities should include hiring those with past non-violent cannabis convictions, local residents, and other historically-disadvantaged populations.	• This recommendation has been partially implemented. • Cannabis operators are struggling, with many experiencing layoffs. • Direct Technical Assistance allows cannabis operators the opportunity to receive training and education on best employment practices.

Executive Summary

High-Level Findings

CONTINUED

2020 CEA Recommendations	2025 Current State
7. Geographic disparities may emerge in cannabis-related activities, and scarcity of available land can cause real estate values to rise. Consider land use guidelines that ensure equitable distribution and thoughtful placement of cannabis businesses.	• This recommendation has been implemented. • The County relies on existing land use classifications from the General Plan.
8. Update the Mendocino County Equity Assessment next year and every 3 years afterwards and create an evaluation plan.	• This recommendation has been implemented. • The CEA was updated in 2025. • An evaluation plan is recommended to be included as part of the development of this CEA that focuses resources and annual deadlines on the following: <i>Data Collection and Analysis:</i> ○ Collect and analyze data on program implementation, compliance rates, and potential challenges. <i>Community Engagement:</i> ○ Engage with stakeholders (cultivators, applicants, consultants, residents, community groups, etc.) to gather feedback and identify areas for improvement. <i>Economic Impact:</i> ○ Crop Reporting: Inclusion of Cannabis in the annual Ag Crop Report ○ Tax Revenue: Monitor the generation of tax revenue from cannabis sales. ○ Economic Development: Evaluate the overall economic impact of the cannabis industry on the region.
9. Mendocino County should assist cannabis equity clients with opportunities to market and network with other equity businesses across the state.	• This recommendation has been implemented. • The County has been able to collaborate with other jurisdictions regarding Cannabis Licensing and Equity Programs. • The County has sponsored an industry working group to bring constituents together for shared initiatives.

Executive Summary

High-Level Findings

Below are high-level findings of strength and opportunities based on the **County of Mendocino 2025 Cannabis Equity Assessment**.

Strengths	Opportunities
Mendocino County LEEP program demonstrate a willingness to embrace equity and craft an inclusive approach	Revise the equity certification application process more to keep in mind the needs of different types of applicants regardless of cohort. For example, those who have progressed in their cultivation journey as a business vs. those who may just be starting as new entrepreneurs.
Cannabis Department Resources and Staff Availability	The County should continue to assist in resolving minor issues and communicating the needs of potential and current applicants.
Growing Accountability & Visibility	Continuing developing methods of outreach while considering the past and current relationship to the cannabis community.
Increased Communications	The County should continue to streamline communications to guide current and potential applicants through the licensing process.
Availability of Funding	The County should continue to explore additional supplemental funding opportunities to support cultivators who desire more expanded opportunities to be reimbursed for cannabis cultivation, operations, etc.
Community Building	Continue inclusion of different perspectives to help build trust, repair harm, reduce stigma and hardship.

Executive Summary

High-Level Recommendations

Focus Areas	Recommendations
Improve Outreach and Communication	Continue to create bilingual outreach materials to ensure accessibility for diverse applicants. Continue to update the Department website so applicants can easily find resources, application instructions, and deadlines.
Increase Transparency and Accessibility	Continue marketing of the Department's Pre-Application Conference which allows a walkthrough of the licensing process. Ensure the community knows they can contact the Department for questions about grants, fee relief, and technical assistance.
Expand Funding and Adjust Tax Policies	Continue to advocate for increased funding at the county level to accommodate more applicants.

County of Mendocino Cannabis Equity Assessment

Project Methodology

This chapter describes the mixed-methods approach and outcomes used to develop the CEA, which involved a review of programmatic information, data, and conducting qualitative interviews and focus groups.

Source: County of Mendocino, CA



Project Methodology

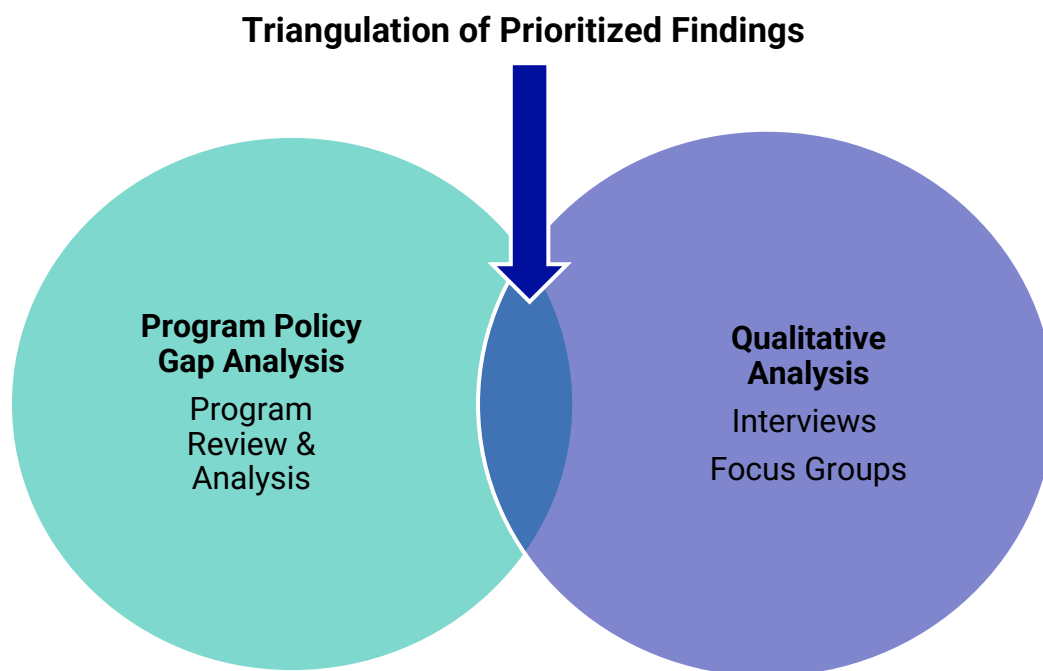
Prioritized findings in this CEA report were developed using a mixed-methods approach that included a program policy gap analysis and qualitative analysis. Data was collected and analyzed through this process, and findings were identified to identify key strengths and gap opportunities.

The project methodology intersects using the following two tools for the purpose of:

Program & Policy Gap Analysis: Supports examining the presence of equity and areas of growth that may be present within current policies and how it impacts the success of programs and services. Three policy documents were examined as part of this CEA.

Qualitative Analysis: Supports gathering insights that help inform the findings and recommendations in the CEA, which highlights to the County how to improve or enhance program experiences and resources. Five (5) virtual stakeholder interviews were conducted that included participants such as business and local cultivators, technical assistance consultants, and equity applicants. Three (3) virtual focus groups that included members of the public including equity applicants.

Findings were identified through the program and policy gap and qualitative analyses and recommendations were developed are derived directly from insights offered by various stakeholders and the public.



County of Mendocino Cannabis Equity Assessment

Program and Policy Gap Analysis

This chapter includes a summary review of programmatic information and policy documents that reviewed to identify strengths and gap opportunities within the County's LEEP and Cannabis Department.



Program & Policy Gap Analysis

As part the CEA, three documents were reviewed using an equity-lens relative to LEEP within the County. A review and analysis identified areas of strength, opportunity, and recommendations for the County to consider to improve its support for the local cannabis business industry, applicants and businesses.

Documents Reviewed	
1	Mendocino County Cannabis Equity Assessment (February 2020)
2	LEEP Fee Relief Procedures
3	LEEP Program Manual V6

General Highlights

1. The County's previous CEA focused on the historical context of Cannabis Criminalization in the County and policy reforms in the State of California and in the County that led to the development of cannabis ordinance and LEEP and a snapshot of Cannabis license applicant profiles in 2020. A review of programmatic and policy documents found that the County has achieved many of the recommendations identified in the 2020 CEA. However, a few recommendations remain for the County to continue to strive to implement.
2. The County demonstrates a willingness to embrace equity and craft an inclusive approach to entering and staying in the regulated cannabis market, which serves as a lead by example for other counties.
3. Resources and staff are readily available for members and potential participants to interface and begin or continue through the licensing and grant process.



Program & Policy Gap Analysis

Strengths:

- All policy and programmatic documents present clear and understandable guidelines pursuant to their topics.
- Department has strong onboarding process, including a new hire packet and information.
- The Department has streamlined eligibility criteria and LEEP naming conventions to ensure consistency and accuracy.

Opportunities:

- Continue to collaborate with community organizations to reach a broader audience and provide additional support for policy and program implementation.
- Increase outreach efforts to ensure that all eligible individuals are aware of the LEEP program and its benefits.
- Continue to streamline digital tools for application processing, tracking, and communication could improve efficiency and reduce manual errors.

Recommendations for Consideration:

- Review and update existing policies and procedures on a regular cadence. Leverage feedback from the community to identify roadblocks and misconceptions in the application process to help update programmatic information and County policies.
- Provide comprehensive guides and resources to help staff and applicants navigate the process more effectively. The County could consider codifying audio or video guides for these resources.
- Continue to conduct regular evaluations of the program to assess its impact and identify areas for improvement. Use feedback from participants and stakeholders to make necessary adjustments.

Program & Policy Gap Analysis

Programs, Policies and Practices

Document Reviewed	Strengths	Opportunities	Questions and Recommendations for Consideration
Mendocino County Cannabis Equity Assessment (February 2020)	• There are clearly established findings and recommendations for the County in the 2020 CEA. • Extensive historical chronology and details regarding context of the Cannabis criminalization in the County, which helped create background understanding and inform the updated CEA conducted in 2025. • Captured chronology of the County's cannabis-related measures. • Clearly identified barriers and recommendations. • Established equity criteria and recommendations for use by the County.	• Opportunity to leverage qualitative data used in the development of this CEA to inform continued expansion of communications, accountability, and resources to prospective and existing applicants. • Opportunity to create more transparency regarding outcomes of this assessment report by making this CEA report available for the public.	• County should continue to strive to support and help incentivize all cannabis operators to provide equitable employment opportunities that provide a living wage. As recommended in the 2020 CEA, these opportunities should include hiring those with past non-violent cannabis convictions, residents, and other historically-disadvantaged populations.

Program & Policy Gap Analysis

Additional Programs, Policies and Practices

Document Reviewed	Strengths	Opportunities	Questions and Recommendations for Consideration
LEEP Fee Relief General Procedure	- The procedure outlines a step-by-step process, ensuring clarity and consistency in handling fee relief applications. - Specific tasks are assigned to different departments, which helps in maintaining accountability. - The use of digital journal entries and tracking spreadsheets ensures that all transactions are documented and can be easily audited. - Sending hard copies to the auditor adds an extra layer of verification.	- Implementing an automated system for tracking and notifying applicants could reduce manual errors and save time. - Automation can also streamline the process of sending journal entries to the appropriate departments. - Providing a portal where applicants can check the status of their waivers in real time could improve transparency and reduce the need for manual notifications. - Offering more detailed updates at each stage of the process could enhance applicant satisfaction.	- Develop an online portal where applicants can submit their applications, track their status, and receive updates. This can enhance transparency and improve the user experience. - Conduct regular audits of the process to identify any bottlenecks or areas for improvement. - Collect feedback from applicants and staff to continuously refine and improve the procedure.

Program & Policy Gap Analysis

Additional Programs, Policies and Practices

Policy Name	Strengths	Opportunities	Questions and Recommendations for Consideration
LEEP Fee Relief General Procedure (Continued)	• Applicants are notified when their waiver has been sent for finalization, which keeps them informed about the status of their application. • Multiple departments are kept in the loop via email, ensuring that all relevant parties are aware of the transactions.	• Regular training sessions for staff on the procedure can ensure that everyone is up to date with the latest processes and any changes. • Providing a detailed FAQ or support guide for applicants can help them understand the process better and reduce the number of inquiries.	• Implement regular training programs for staff to ensure they are well-versed in the procedure and any updates. • Provide comprehensive guides and resources to help staff and applicants navigate the process more effectively.

Program & Policy Gap Analysis

Additional Programs, Policies and Practices

Document Reviewed	Strengths	Opportunities	Questions and Recommendations for Consideration
LEEP Program Manual V6	- The program offers a wide range of support, including fee relief, direct grants, and technical assistance, addressing various needs of equity applicants. - Specific services such as employment skills training, regulatory compliance, and business development are well-defined. - The manual provides detailed eligibility criteria, ensuring that applicants understand the requirements for participation. - Criteria include the historical impact of cannabis criminalization, economic status, and personal experiences, which are clearly outlined.	- Implementing digital tools for application processing, tracking, and communication could improve efficiency and reduce manual errors. - Opportunity to share identified best practice approaches from equity applicants on cultivation, marketing, applications, etc. - Increasing outreach efforts to ensure that all eligible individuals are aware of the program and its benefits. - Continue to collaborate with community organizations to reach a broader audience and provide additional support.	- Continue to enhance outreach efforts through leveraged community partnerships, workshops, and informational sessions to ensure that all eligible individuals are aware of the program. - Continue to provide educational resources and support to help applicants understand the eligibility criteria and application process. - Use digital tools to automate the tracking and reporting of grant funds and technical assistance. This can reduce administrative burden and improve accuracy.

Program & Policy Gap Analysis

Additional Programs, Policies and Practices

Document Reviewed	Strengths	Opportunities	Questions and Recommendations for Consideration
LEEP Program Manual V6 (Continued)	- The program administration section outlines responsibilities and procedures for managing funds and ensuring accountability and transparency. - Regular audits and documentation requirements help maintain compliance and proper use of funds. - The program is designed to advance economic justice for populations impacted by cannabis prohibition, promoting equitable access to the cannabis industry. - The use of an equity approach ensures that resources are allocated based on specific needs, aiming for fair outcomes.	- Regularly update the program based on feedback from participants and stakeholders to address any gaps or areas for improvement. - Conducting periodic reviews to ensure that the program remains aligned with its goals and objectives.	- Conduct regular evaluations of LEEP to assess its impact and identify areas for improvement. Use feedback from participants and stakeholders to make necessary adjustments. - Ensure that the program remains flexible and adaptable to changing needs and circumstances.

County of Mendocino Cannabis Equity Assessment

Qualitative Analysis

This chapter includes a summary of qualitative analysis findings from interviews of focus groups conducted for this updated CEA.



Qualitative Analysis

Focus Groups – Quick Facts



3 Focus Groups, 90 minutes each



Focus Group Types: **Resident Volunteers (Business and Local Cultivators)**



17 questions with the following key areas: Fee Relief, Technical Assistance, Direct Grants

Interviews – Quick Facts



10 Interviews, 60 minutes each



Interview Types: **Business and Local Cultivators, Technical Assistance Consultants, Equity Applicants, Cannabis Department Staff**



19 questions with the following key areas: Fee Relief, Technical Assistance, Direct Grants, Collaboration and Future Opportunities

As part of this updated CEA, a series of focus groups and interviews were conducted. Focus groups and interviews were an important part of gaining insights about the County's LEEP successes, challenges and areas for growth, particularly around fee relief, technical assistance and direct grants. Insights from these engagement activities were tied to enhance the Cannabis Department's focus on equity with a culture of inclusion that drives decision-making and encourages a welcoming and supportive environment for all its residents. The following section includes a summary of the key questions asked of participants. All qualitative responses were processed, coded and grouped by similar themes and sub-themes, de-identified of all personal information, and reported out providing both direct anecdotes and summarized feedback.



Qualitative Analysis

Interviews & Focus Groups

Fee Relief

Questions	Major Insights
What is going well?	The fee relief program has been crucial for participation, but expansion to state fees is needed.
How are needs being met?	Faster communications to reduce delays. There are internal inefficiencies across County departments, particularly in how they interface with Cannabis businesses.
Who benefits most?	Those with consultants who anticipate funding cycles and apply early. Many in need may miss out due to timing.
Key wishes for equity and access?	Better information accessibility and proactive outreach to those unaware of available assistance. Desire for more integrated application process with hands-on technical guidance.

Positive Aspects: Helps businesses stay afloat, reduces tax burden, and provide essential support. The County Board of Supervisors approved a tax reduction ordinance in March 2023, including a Delinquent Cannabis Tax Amnesty & Payment Plan Program. The County Board of Supervisors also approved a tax reduction two separate times.

Opportunities: Not all applicants are aware of or understand the County's LEEP. Some participants felt that fee relief benefited established businesses more than smaller, struggling entrepreneurs. There is uneven distribution of resources—some groups benefit more than others. Additionally, communication gaps prevent equitable access to fee relief. However, high tax burdens continue to be a barrier for equity applicants, even with fee relief available through the County.

Direct Technical Assistance

Questions	Major Insights
What is going well?	Technical assistance covers one-on-one consulting, training Small business support services, professional mentorship services
How are needs being met?	General workshops provide for help, but the direct technical assistance lacks specificity for different business stages.
Who benefits most?	Those already knowledgeable about leveraging direct technical assistance support for their cannabis business. Some farmers miss out due to lack of awareness of the direct technical assistance program outside of "word of mouth."
Key wishes for equity and access?	Include more accessibility and consideration of groups that most need technical assistance services.

Positive Aspects: Some applicants found the technical assistance support helpful, especially in navigating compliance.

Opportunities: The technical assistance program is not widely understood or used by all equity applicants. There is a need for a more structured, direct and accessible support system to support mentoring relationships with other cannabis businesses both regionally and within the State of California.

Qualitative Analysis

Interviews & Focus Groups

Direct Grants

Questions	Major Insights
What is going well?	Includes cultural inclusion, accessibility, and fee coverage.
How are needs being met?	Improvements needed to avoid delays. A structured funding menu could streamline applications and reduce review time by staff.
Who benefits most?	Applicants already in the direct grant queue benefit the most. Those with consultants who anticipate funding cycles and apply early. Many in need miss out due to timing.
Key wishes for equity and access?	Enhance direct and indirect communications from the County on the direct grant program, particularly for those who lack technological access to apply or gather direct grant information online.

Positive Aspects: Direct grants have provided critical funding for major projects and infrastructure for cannabis businesses through the County.

Opportunities: There is insufficient funding to cover all eligible applicants. Bureaucratic hurdles limit timely access to direct grant funds.

Collaboration and Future Opportunities

Questions	Major Insights
Successful collaboration looks like...	Supporting economic and social initiatives for long-term viability.
Advice for County leadership?	Focus on supportive policies that can help better foster direct-to-consumer sales to eliminate middlemen and sustain farmers.
Additional topics of interest?	Future funding opportunities; program sustainability; and support match-making opportunities for consultants seeking to support equity applicants navigate Fee Relief process were topics of interest desired for additional future collaborations.

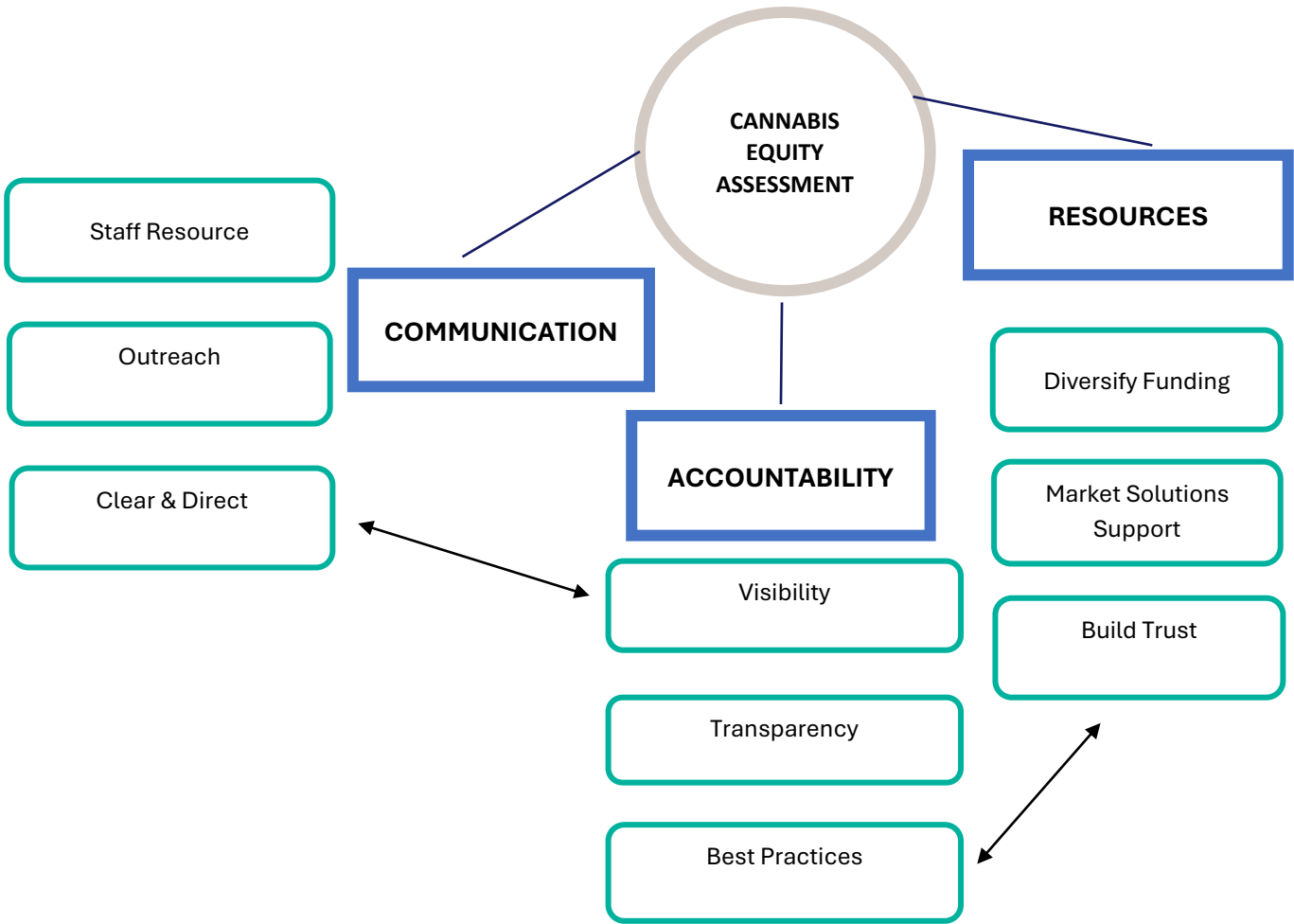
Positive Aspects: Several organizations exist to potentially partner within the County. There is high interest to conduct direct outreach and assistance for new cannabis entrepreneurs.

Opportunities: Potential areas to leverage farmer networks more widely. LEEP does not fully reflect the needs of all disadvantaged groups, opportunity to leverage untapped groups. Explore how to connect with socio-economic and marginalized groups in the County.

Qualitative Analysis

Stakeholder Feedback – Thematic Analysis

The results of interviews and focus groups resulted in the following key themes and insights. Below is a summary chart that shows the various overall themes and subthemes that emerged through conversation.



Legend Key:

- Circle ○ = Objective
- Bolded Rectangle **■** = Theme
- Rectangle □ = Sub-theme
- Line — = Link to theme
- Arrows ↔ = Link to sub-theme

Qualitative Analysis

THEMES

The **Communication theme** was elevated as a need to broaden the County's communications and marketing outreach efforts on the LEEP, particularly in rural areas of the County, connecting with more diverse populations. Additionally, interview and focus group participants shared a desire for more streamlined information to help better navigate the volume of different documents and links that are currently shared by the County. There is a need for more clarity on different sources of funding and what it can be used by prospective cannabis businesses.

- *"There has been clear communication and concrete timelines. This has been better but did not always exist that way. It would be good for the County to empower people to help applicants. Change in administration has had efficiencies."*

The **Resources theme** elevated concerns around a need to provide funding to better accommodate for different business needs by permitting new ways in which the fee relief and direct grants can be utilized. However, the direct grant program is a State grant program, and the County does not decide what is an appropriate use of State funding. Overall, most stakeholders shared that there is a lack of enough funding to accommodate all needs in the community and there is confusion around future funding availability. There is a desire to see if fee relief support or other resources can be identified to support payment of state fees and not just County fees. However, fee relief cannot go towards meeting State fees. Stakeholders shared that there remains a lack of trust at the local and state levels. Stakeholders expressed a need for more direct technical assistance particularly on topics for those who have been in the County's LEEP program from its inception but want to continue to benefit and evolve as a business in the cannabis industry.

- *"Streamlined process became much easier. Previously we would have to go to different departments. Once it came through email - it was positive. Fee relief has been the biggest benefit for me since we did not qualify for the other [options]. Fee relief was most effective and reliable of the programs."*

The **Accountability theme** included conversations around the need for greater visibility, transparency and integration of best practices. Though accountability measures have increased since 2020, participants shared that increased transparency and communication regarding the process is still warranted and needed. Additionally, mitigating internal miscommunication between departments at the County will help enhance applicant experiences as part of LEEP.

- *"We need boots on ground as farmer groups are looking for solutions to stay viable, as cannabis transitions. Collaboration with groups would help facilitate a stronger economy and build successful collaboration."*

Qualitative Analysis

Communication Outreach

- Broader communications/marketing of LEEP is needed across the County
- Diversify types of outreach to reach different groups with various levels of accessibility
- Outreach with local community resources (i.e., library, farmer's market, etc.)

Communication Streamlined Communications

- Direct blanket communications with hyperlinked resources
- Include flow charts with links/steps outlined in communications for user-friendliness and ease of access to information in centralized locations

Communication Responsibilities

- Interface throughout the process
- Continue rollout of information on a consistent basis

Accountability Visibility

- Provide support for both new and experienced recipients of LEEP
- Revisit the needs of early applicants in LEEP to address moving goal posts across time as they graduate into different stages (i.e., new entrepreneurs, businesses with formidable years of business experience, etc.)
- Acknowledge cannabis industry as a major contributor to the local community and regional economy

Accountability Transparency

- Increase communication throughout the process
- Mitigate internal miscommunication between departments within the County
- Shift from highly structured interpretations to more flexible approach to interpretation in reviewing

Accountability Best Practices

- Identify County best practices whilst monitoring market trends
- Create space for diverse groups to share vision and needs

Qualitative Analysis

Resources

Diversify Funding

- Keep a pulse on the cannabis market both locally and regionally and respond accordingly

Resources

Market Solutions Support

- Share information on future funding resources earlier and consistently in untapped groups that are infrequently marketed to such as (i.e., Hispanic, African American and/or Native American populations within the County

Resources

Building Trust

- Increase visibility of staff to potential applicants
- Repair harm that has been done in the community through incentivizing businesses to provide equitable employment opportunities that provide a living wage
- Transparency regarding funding resources
- Promote a programmatic culture of respect and empathy, where all voices are valued to build trust

County of Mendocino Cannabis Equity Assessment

Recommendations for Improvement

This chapter includes recommendations for improvements by the County for LEEP and the Cannabis Department operations to ensure stronger equity practices to the public and to support thriving economic development in the County.

Source: County of Mendocino, CA



Recommendations

MGT has identified three key areas of focus that emerged from an analysis of County policies, the LEEP program and its practices, stakeholder interviews, focus groups, and other data. Each area of focus includes recommendations for Mendocino County and suggested tactics to assist in implementing each of the suggestions.

Focus Area	Recommendations	Suggested Solution
Fee Relief	• Increase awareness and understanding through communication and establish touch points regarding eligibility for the fee relief program.	1. Continue to advocate for increased funding at the county level to accommodate more applicants. 2. <u>Increase Awareness and Understanding:</u> Develop Program Materials: Create brochures, FAQs, and webinars detailing the Program. 3. <u>Utilize Multiple Outreach Channels:</u> Disseminate information through industry newsletters, and community organizations to reach a diverse audience. 4. <u>Continue to Offer Personalized Assistance:</u> Continue to assist applicants with questions about grants, fee relief, and technical assistance. 5. <u>Continue to Monitor and Evaluate Impact:</u> Continue to collect demographic data. 6. <u>Adjust Strategies Accordingly:</u> Collect data to refine outreach and support mechanisms, ensuring continuous improvement.

Recommendations

Focus Area	Recommendations	Suggested Solution
Technical Assistance	• Increase access to technical assistance through communications mechanisms such as creating valuable content (blog posts, articles, videos) that can attract and engage audiences, driving traffic to the Department website, leverage video conferencing (i.e., MS Teams, Zoom), video tutorials, Storytelling Clinics, etc.	1. Expand complementary technical support in the form of mentorship, increased community outreach and knowledge sharing for new and existing cannabis businesses. Develop regular peer-to-peer storytelling clinics to share knowledge around business growth. 2. Diversify outreach regarding provided services including technical assistance. 3. <u>Standardize Resource Distribution</u>: Develop a Centralized Resource Hub: Create an online platform offering templates, compliance checklists, and best practice guides accessible to all equity applicants. 4. <u>Ensure Consistent Quality</u>: Continue to regularly update and review materials to reflect current regulations and industry standards. 5. <u>Continue to Enhance Technical Assistance Program Accessibility</u>: Continue to Conduct Regular Workshops and Webinars: Sessions should continue to be offered at various times to accommodate different schedules. 6. <u>Continue to Provide Bilingual Support</u>: Offer all materials and assistance in English and Spanish to cater to diverse communities. 7. <u>Establish Mentorship Programs</u>: Pair less experienced cannabis entrepreneurs with seasoned industry professionals for guidance and support. Provide one-on-one mentorship programs with industry experts. 8. The County has recently sponsored an industry working group which will allow collaboration and encourage constituents to work together for shared initiatives. County is recommended expand the industry working group.

Recommendations

Focus Area	Recommendations	Suggested Solution
Direct Grants	Streamline funding process and ensure adequate funding allocation.	<u>Clarify Application Guidance</u>: Provide Detailed Instructions: Offer comprehensive guides outlining eligibility, required documentation, and evaluation criteria. <u>Host Q&A Sessions</u>: Allow prospective applicants to seek clarification on the application process. Sessions can be held virtually and in-person in community locations such as libraries, farmer markets, etc. <u>Ensure Adequate Funding Allocation</u>: Continue to advocate for increased resources by engaging local and state policymakers to secure more funding for grant programs.

Recommendations

Focus Area	Recommendations	Suggested Solution
Diversity Concerns	Diversify the LEEP program equity applicant pool and reach to disadvantaged groups within the County.	Create bilingual outreach materials to ensure accessibility for diverse applicants.
Policies & Program	Improve outreach and communication to provide holistic wrap-around service delivery of the LEEP program and Cannabis Department business services.	- Consider more detailed visuals and infographics regarding the program to communicate steps and eligibility. - Regularly gather feedback and review policies to ensure they're working as intended and are serving the County's needs. - Develop a centralized online hub where applicants can easily find resources, application instructions, and deadlines. - Employ a mix of traditional media (flyers, community bulletin boards) and digital platforms (emails) to reach a broad audience, considering varying levels of digital access and those who may have limited internet access in rural areas.
Cannabis Department Operations	- Establish Monitoring Frameworks - Engage the Community in Monitoring - Report Findings Publicly	- Define key performance indicators and metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of the implemented policies. - Continue to involve community members in the monitoring process to ensure transparency and inclusivity. - Share evaluation results with the community through accessible reports and meetings to maintain trust and accountability.

Recommendations

Focus Area	Recommendations	Suggested Solution
Community Partnerships	• Conduct better outreach and education on the County LEEP program and leverage community partnerships.	1. Build partnerships with existing trusted and external organizations to enhance cannabis equity efforts and outreach.
Establish Clear Equity Metrics	• Track who is benefiting the most from the LEEP program and identify disadvantaged groups.	1. Use demographic data and feedback surveys to measure program effectiveness.

By implementing these targeted guidelines, the cannabis industry in the County can foster a more equitable environment, ensuring that Fee Relief, Technical Assistance, and Direct Grants programs effectively support all entrepreneurs, particularly those from underserved segments of the County.

County of Mendocino Cannabis Equity Assessment

Conclusion

In conclusion, this updated CEA found the majority of recommendations from the 2020 CEA were successfully completed. Findings from this CEA provide key areas of additional support.

Source: County of Mendocino

