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### A first in the weed-shop world

A company looking to open a store in Fulton Market signs a so-called "community benefits agreement," underscoring one of the major political challenges around legalizing recreational-cannabis use.

JOHN PLETZ  

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A company that's hoping to open a retail marijuana shop in the West Loop has signed a community benefits agreement that guarantees wage levels, hiring, vendor commitments and charitable donations.

Nature's Care, which is owned by New York-based cannabis company Acreage Holdings, is the first dispensary applicant to sign a formal community benefits agreement, underscoring one of the major political challenges around legalizing recreational-cannabis use.

Illinois' recreational marijuana law passed only because it included equity provisions to make sure neighborhoods and residents impacted by the War on Drugs will benefit from the legal sale of marijuana. Among other provisions, such as [giving dispensary applicants from "disproportionately impacted communities" an edge](#), the law also provides extra points when it comes to pursuing new licenses, as well as credit of up to 2 percent for companies that sign "labor peace" agreements.

The agreement comes as the Zoning Board of Appeals will consider applications from seven companies on Friday to open new dispensaries in the city. A key consideration in the zoning process is community input.

Nature's Care, which wants to open a dispensary at 810 W. Randolph St. in Fulton Market, signed the agreement with a group called the Cannabis Equity Illinois Coalition, a not-for-profit that sprang up in the past couple of years as legalization of recreational use started to take shape.

The agreement calls for Nature's Care to hire 75 percent of its employees have connections to disproportionately impacted areas within two years, pay a "living wage" of at least \$13.16 per hour and donate 10 percent to the dispensary's profits to community organizations.

It may be the first community benefits agreement signed in Chicago, said Dick Simpson, a professor of political science at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Residents and community groups have unsuccessfully pushed for a CBA related to the Obama Presidential Center.

"There's been a lot of talk about (CBAs), but I don't know of any that have been signed," Simpson said. "Cannabis companies know they're in competition (for locations), and they need community support. This may set a new standard for what is expected."

Developers often make concessions sought by community groups, but they're reluctant to sign agreements.

Cannabis companies say they're already doing much of what the community groups are seeking.

Charles Amadin, general manager of the Nature's Care dispensary in Rolling Meadows, says the company pays above the living wage, although he declined to say how much Nature's Care employees make on average. "We want to walk the walk as well as talk the talk," he said.

Ten percent of a dispensary's profit could easily top \$1 million.

"Ten percent is a good deal," said Ald. Walter Burnett, whose 27th Ward includes Fulton Market, although he acknowledged he would have liked the number to be higher. But he praised Nature's Care for having "put forth a good effort in including the community in their project."

It's unclear how binding the community benefits agreement would be, since the benefits agreement is with a not-for-profit, not the city or a government agency. To enforce it, the Cannabis Equity Illinois Coalition would have to sue.

"We expect one to two more [cannabis companies] to sign before Friday," said Akele Parnell of Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights, which is representing the coalition. "We'd like to see all of them adopt these business practices."