



# AMERICAN ATHEISTS

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February 16, 2023

The Honorable Representative Martin LaLonde  
Chair, House Judiciary Committee  
115 State Street  
Montpelier, Vermont 05633

**Re: SUPPORT for H 148, Ending Child Marriage in Vermont**

Dear Chairperson LaLonde and Members of the Judiciary House Committee:

American Atheists, on behalf of its constituents in Vermont, we write in support of H 148. This bill would protect young people by ending child marriage in Vermont, preventing young people from being coerced into marriage against their will, a harmful and archaic practice that happens all too frequently across our nation. We urge you to swiftly pass this important legislation.

American Atheists is a national civil rights organization that works to achieve religious equality for all Americans by protecting what Thomas Jefferson called the “wall of separation” between government and religion created by the First Amendment. We strive to create an environment where atheism and atheists are accepted as members of our nation’s communities and where casual bigotry against our community is seen as abhorrent and unacceptable. We promote understanding of atheists through education, outreach, and community building and work to end the stigma associated with being an atheist in America. American Atheists believes that children should never be coerced into marriage, especially due to the religious beliefs of their parents or guardians.

Current Vermont law has loopholes that permit young people under the age of 18 to marry with parental consent and judicial approval. Appallingly, the minimum age is sixteen for such marriages. Approximately 289 minors were married in Vermont between 2000 and 2021.<sup>1</sup> 80% of those marriages were girls married to adult men. In other words, this loophole has allowed criminal conduct against children in Vermont, and it must be closed immediately.

The harm caused by child marriage is daunting, particularly for young women and girls. It damages their health, irrevocably reduces their education and economic opportunities, and increases their risk of experiencing violence.<sup>2</sup> Those who marry before 18 have a 70 to 80% chance of getting divorced—and teen mothers who marry and then divorce are much more likely to end up in poverty than teen mothers who stay single. Nearly 300,000 minors were married in

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<sup>1</sup>*United States' Child Marriage Problem*. Unchained At Last. (2021, April). Available at: <https://www.unchainedatlast.org/united-states-child-marriage-problem-study-findings-april-2021/>.

<sup>2</sup> Hamilton VE. (2012). "The Age of Marital Capacity: Reconsidering Civil Recognition of Adolescent Marriage." William & Mary Law School Scholarship Repository, Faculty Publications, 1430. Available at <http://scholarship.law.wm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2467&context=facpubs>.

the U.S. between 2000 and 2018,<sup>3</sup> with 86% of child marriages between 2000 and 2015 being between a minor and an adult.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, the U.S. State Department has called marriage before age 18 a “human rights abuse.”<sup>5</sup> However, children can easily be forced to marry before they turn 18 and become legal adults, because they face overwhelming legal and practical barriers if they try to leave home, enter a domestic-violence shelter, retain an attorney, or bring a legal action. Unfortunately, a requirement of parental “consent” hardly mitigates the danger of forced child marriage because when a child is forced to marry, the perpetrators are almost always the parents. There will always be parental “consent” when there is parental coercion in the first place. Therefore, Vermont law currently contains no effective procedural safeguard against the danger of forced child marriage.

Child marriage robs young people of the right to choose their own path in life. By adopting H 148, Vermont would effectively eliminate existing loopholes and join states such as New Jersey, Delaware, New York, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island, in taking proactive steps to end child marriage. We urge you to swiftly pass this important legislation to protect young people in Vermont. If you have any questions regarding American Atheists’ support for H 148, please contact me at [bwilliams@atheists.org](mailto:bwilliams@atheists.org).

Sincerely,



Brittany Williams  
State Policy Counsel  
American Atheists

cc: All Members of the Vermont House Judiciary Committee

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<sup>3</sup> *United States' Child Marriage Problem*. Unchained At Last. (2021, April). Retrieved October 27, 2021, from <https://www.unchainedatlast.org/united-states-child-marriage-problem-study-findings-april-2021/>.

<sup>4</sup> Tsui A, Nolan S, and Amico C. (July 6, 2017). Child Marriage in America: By the Numbers. Available at <http://apps.frontline.org/child-marriage-by-the-numbers/>.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of State, et al. (2016). United States Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls. Available at <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/254904.pdf>.