

January 24, 2022

Testimony in Support of H631: Ending Child Marriage
Presented to Vermont House Committee on Judiciary

Dear Chair Grad, Vice Chair Burditt and Distinguished Committee Members,

The Service Women's Action Network (SWAN), a not-for-profit organization advocating for servicewomen, past, present, and future, urges you to end all marriage before 18, without an exception for servicemembers or any other exceptions. We do not believe that marriage is acceptable under the age of 18 for any reason, including service to our nation. We understand that often the purpose of marriage for servicemembers under the age of 18 is to ensure that if a service member were to lose their life overseas, their spouse would receive full benefits for their service to our nation.

Under the Survivor Benefit Plan, service members can designate a significant other to receive benefits if the service member passes away; the Plan does not require the individuals to be married. Additionally, servicemember' military benefits extend to their children, regardless of the servicemembers' marital status so long as the child is properly recognized as a dependent. Death gratuity is also offered for service members who die while on active duty or while serving in certain reserve statuses. The death gratuity is the same regardless of the cause of death.

The longstanding purpose of the death gratuity has been to provide an immediate cash payment to assist survivors of deceased members of the Armed forces to meet their financial needs during the period immediately following a member's death and before other survivor benefits, if any, become available.

SWAN believes that using marriage for servicemembers leaving to war as a motive to keep marriage before 18 legal in this country is a misinformed stance. Servicemembers who choose to serve our country can select their beneficiaries; therefore, the requirement for marriage is needless.

A secondary consideration is the military health and housing benefits afforded to spouses. Military health and housing benefits through a spouse are not a solution for underage marriage. A child's economic dependency should not justify marriage before 18 years old. Underage marriage can create a long-term level of dependence that increases a spouse's chance of experiencing domestic violence.

Thank you for your consideration. Please do not hesitate to reach out to our organization for additional information. We appreciate your continued support of our nation's service members and veterans.

Sincerely,



Deshauna Barber
CEO, Service Women's Action Network

