

## HB 631 End Child Marriage

### Testimony

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Thank you Madame Chair and Committee Members for hearing testimony on this important matter.

The first time I became aware of the issue of child marriage, I was working as a social worker supporting teens who were pregnant or parenting. I met a new client, a girl under the legal age of consent who was 8 months pregnant. In my intake with her, she revealed the name of the person who was the father of her unborn baby and casually told me that he was 24 years old. As a mandated reporter of child abuse, I made the report to Child Protective Services only to find that they were already aware of the case and were not able to take any action, since the child was married to her abuser. As a social worker concerned for the safety of this child, I was more worried than ever! So, I phoned a criminal report to law enforcement, who were also already aware of the 24-year-old's sexual involvement with the girl, but also would not take action to arrest him due to the marriage. That was in Georgia, and the law was changed after legislators discovered how a loop-hole was protecting a predator rather than protecting a child.

In Vermont, children who are under age 18 are marrying at an alarming rate. These marriages are often forced by parents or by an older suitor who has more power than the child.

Based on marriage-certificate data the nonprofit organization Unchained At Last collected from the Vermont Department of Health, between 2000 and 2022:

- Some 289 minors were married in Vermont
- About 80% were girls wed to adult men an average 4.96 years older
- Two of the children were age 15, even though marriage is not allowed before age 16
- Further, like the case that I was involved in in Georgia, the spouse of one of the 15-year-olds could otherwise have been charged with a sex crime, but the marriage license hindered enforcement of laws designed to protect children from sexual abuse. Within a marriage, that sexual abuse can happen repeatedly, and the authorities are unable or unwilling to act. In this regard, the child is a virtual sex slave.

A clearly defined marriage age of 18, without loopholes, such as parental consent or a judge's signature that reduces the approved age, could help prevent this from happening again.