

Greetings Chair Grad:

I am the Director of Policy and Advocacy at Unchained At Last. Unchained is a survivor-led nonprofit working to end forced and child marriage in Vermont and across the U.S. We are in strong support of H631, the bill to end child marriage in Vermont, currently pending in the Judiciary Committee. The points below address why amending H631 to add an emancipation loophole to the marriage laws would be extremely dangerous and bad public policy and we urge you to not add an emancipation loophole to H631. Please let me know if you have any questions.

- Emancipation is Intended to help minors who cannot be reunited with their family by giving them some limited rights of adulthood so they can navigate the world independently until they turn 18 and attain full rights of adulthood. Marriage is not necessary for a minor to navigate the world on their own.
 - Emancipated minors in Vermont are [not allowed to engage in age restricted activities under federal and state laws](#) until they reach the age required for those activities. Given the many serious harms of marriage before 18, Vermont must include marriage on the list of activities prohibited even for emancipated teens.
- Carving out a loophole for emancipated minors creates an avenue for parents to force their child to emancipate in order to force them to marry. The concern that parents will force teens to emancipate to force them to marry is not far-fetched. Advocates have seen something similar happen in the U.K., where parents have set up children with fake jobs at the family business and bank accounts to which the children do not have access, to make the court believe the children are financially independent.
- The emancipation loophole removes the only avenue for escape for teens whose parents plan to take them overseas for a forced marriage. In states without an emancipation loophole, Unchained can help such teens seek emancipation and refuse to go overseas. However, Unchained would not be able to do this in Vermont if an emancipation loophole is added, out of concern that once the teen is emancipated, their parents can marry them off without going overseas.
 - Indeed, just months after Texas passed a bill in 2017 that allowed child marriage only for emancipated teens, that loophole trapped a 16-year-old Unchained At Last client in a nightmarish scenario. Her parents were planning to take her overseas to force her to marry and the courts refused to intervene to stop the trip. Unchained would have helped the girl seek emancipation so she could refuse to travel with her parents, but, with the new law in place, Unchained could not seek emancipation for the girl out of fear her parents would immediately pounce on her emancipated status and coerce her to marry in Texas.
- The U.S. and 192 other countries have promised to end child marriage by the year 2030 under the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#). The world cannot keep this promise if states simply emancipate children before their marriage and then say it is no longer “child marriage.”

Thank you,

Michele Hanash (she/her)
Director of Policy and Advocacy
Unchained At Last