



Connecticut Joint Committee on Judiciary
February 27, 2023

In Support of HB6569: An Act Concerning the Minimum Age to be Eligible to Marry

Dear Senator Winfield, Senator Stafstrom, Senator Kissel, Representative Fishbein and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee:

My name is Loretta Jay and I am the managing member of the Justice of the Peace Association. In this capacity, I represent civil marriage officiants in Connecticut and throughout the Northeast, and I urge you **to support HB6569** which increases the minimum age to marry to 18. For officiants, kids getting married is personal.

When a 16- or 17-year-old gets married, they are three times more likely to be beaten by their spouse compared to 21-year-olds.ⁱ And they're at significantly higher risk of suffering from psychiatric disorders.ⁱⁱ Girls (it is usually girls) who marry are less likely to finish high school or graduate from college. Furthermore, they are 31% more likely to live in poverty.ⁱⁱⁱ Unsurprisingly, this carries over into adulthood. To illustrate, kids who marry are 11% more likely to be poor when older^{iv}, too. In fact, marriage before 18 is recognized as a human rights abuse by the U.S. State Department because it produces devastating, lifelong consequences.^v

Pregnancy is not an excuse, either. Pregnant teens who marry are more likely to suffer economic deprivation and instability compared to those who stay single. And because 70-80% of child marriages end in divorce, there is an even greater likelihood she'll have less education and less income, with potentially nowhere to go, completely on her own when her marriage fails.

When people think about a marriage ceremony, they usually think of either a religious or a secular wedding celebration. In reality, all that is required is the officiant witnessing the couple affirming their intention to be married and then processing the paperwork. No frills and no fluff required. We must remember, marriage is a *legal* act.

I started my career at DCF, charged with protecting children from the abuse and neglect inflicted by their caregivers. So, it shocks me that our current law has a built-in loophole that allows parents to enter their teen into the legal contract of marriage. Even though we know that parents are the ones who are most likely to coerce their kids into this arrangement. Once married, kids do not qualify for legal protection through DCF, nor can they access an adult domestic violence shelter.

Members of the Justice of the Peace Association are professionals who take their responsibility very seriously. They abide by a Code of Ethics that dictates acting in their clients' best interest. When we polled our members in 2018, 95% responded^{vi} that they would likely refuse to marry a minor and wanted 18 to be the minimum age – no matter what. The current law puts marriage officiants in a legal and ethical quandary. Much like I was on the front line when I worked at DCF, officiants are on the front line now, feeling complicit if compelled to subject a child to such a bleak future.

Therefore, I respectfully ask you to vote YES in favor of HB6569 and make 18 the legal age to marry in Connecticut without exception. Thank you for this opportunity to share this perspective. I welcome your questions or further discussion.

ⁱ World Policy Analysis Center Fact Sheet, March 2015.

https://www.worldpolicycenter.org/sites/default/files/WORLD_Fact_Sheet_Legal_Protection_Against_Child_Marriage_2015.pdf. Accessed 2/26/2023.

ⁱⁱ Yann Le Strat, Caroline Dubertret, Bernard Le Foll, *Child Marriage in the United States and Its Association with Mental Health in Women, Pediatrics* (2011) 128 (3): 524–530. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2011-0961>. Accessed 2/26/2023.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hamilton, Vivian E., *The Age of Marital Capacity: Reconsidering Civil Recognition of Adolescent Marriage* (2012). Faculty Publications. 1430. <https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/facpubs/1430>. Accessed 2/26/2023.

^{iv} *ibid*

^v United States Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls, page 21. March 2016. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/254904.pdf>. Accessed 2/26/2023.

^{vi} Coalition to End Child Marriage, Justice of the Peace Association. Retrieved from <https://www.findajp.com/jpus/coalition-to-end-child-marriage/>. Accessed 2/26/2023.