



MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WITNESS APPEARANCE FORM

BILL NUMBER: HB 1200		DATE: 2/11/2025
COMMITTEE: Children and Families		
TESTIFYING: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN SUPPORT OF <input type="checkbox"/> IN OPPOSITION TO <input type="checkbox"/> FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES		
WITNESS NAME		
INDIVIDUAL:		
WITNESS NAME: ALICE M GREGORY		PHONE NUMBER:
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:
ADDRESS:		
CITY:		STATE: ZIP:
EMAIL: amicheleg@sbcglobal.net	ATTENDANCE: Written	SUBMIT DATE: 2/11/2025 12:29 PM
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Children under 18 do not have the maturity to decide to marry



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WITNESS NAME		
INDIVIDUAL:		
WITNESS NAME: AMY S THOMPSON		PHONE NUMBER:
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:
ADDRESS:		
CITY:		STATE: ZIP:
EMAIL: seuss1988@gmail.com	ATTENDANCE: Written	SUBMIT DATE: 2/11/2025 9:27 AM
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It is difficult to believe that this needs to be addressed at all. One issue that has widespread support is that of protecting our children from harm. With that in mind, why would we allow children who can't function in society as adults to marry. If we as a state want to protect children, we will make the age for marriage 18.



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WITNESS NAME			
INDIVIDUAL:			
WITNESS NAME: ARNIE C. "HONEST-ABE" DIENOFF-STATE PUBLIC ADVOCATE		PHONE NUMBER:	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:	
ADDRESS:			
CITY:		STATE:	ZIP:
EMAIL: arniedienoff@yahoo.com	ATTENDANCE: In-Person		SUBMIT DATE: 2/11/2025 10:59 PM
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I am in Support of this Bill. We as Missouri have an obligation to Protect ALL of the children under the age of 18 years of age. I feel that individuals must be 18 or over to get married.



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WITNESS NAME		
INDIVIDUAL:		
WITNESS NAME: ASHLEY M COSSINS		PHONE NUMBER:
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:
ADDRESS:		
CITY:		STATE: ZIP:
EMAIL: ashleymcossins@gmail.com	ATTENDANCE: Written	SUBMIT DATE: 2/11/2025 8:56 PM
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WITNESS NAME			
INDIVIDUAL:			
WITNESS NAME: BARBARA ANNE ADAMS		PHONE NUMBER:	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:	
ADDRESS:			
CITY:		STATE:	ZIP:
EMAIL: Sophiesmomme@icloud.com	ATTENDANCE: Written	SUBMIT DATE: 2/6/2025 5:30 PM	
THE INFORMATION ON THIS FORM IS PUBLIC RECORD UNDER CHAPTER 610, RSMo.			

Testimony in Support of HB 1200 Presented to the Missouri House Children and Families Committee on February 11, 2025 Barbara Adams Age 63 State of Georgia I married at the age of 16. I was not pregnant at the time in case you may think that was the reason. After many years of suffering, grieving and processing through my past, I am just now learning how to be an adult in the world and be accountable and responsible for myself first. To get to know myself, love myself truly and unconditionally as a person AND as a feminine. I became a wife and mother before I became a fully recognized person in my own eyes which of course, is a vital and necessary part of "growing up". So many rights of passage I missed in my life, up until now when I can actually see myself and my part in my own life. Please be reminded and understand that the commitments of marriage is not something some 16 year olds can comprehend, much less live out in healthy ways to develop into an adult. Becoming a wife or husband should be reserved for those who can decide and choose clearly and fully, based on clear facts and what is absolutely best for them as an individual.. not on "the feelings" of being intertwined in a "couple". Maturity is essential! Often times some of us became parents before we even knew how to finish raising ourselves to a responsible level to participate in our own lives and the lives of our loved ones and family members. Hence, we then only survived the best we could. This all can (and in my case did) create dysfunction and failure to thrive. Please ensure a more reasonable age for legal marriage to ensure maturity and emotional development is intact. Personally I would suggest 30's and above minimum. Thank you for reading this and considering my testimony. Barbara Adams February 6, 2025



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WITNESS NAME			
INDIVIDUAL:			
WITNESS NAME: BRANDI DREDGE		PHONE NUMBER:	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:	
ADDRESS:			
CITY:		STATE:	ZIP:
EMAIL: becca@unchainedatlast.org		ATTENDANCE: In-Person	SUBMIT DATE: 2/9/2025 1:23 PM
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I am a survivor of child marriage and I intend to share my story with the committee in person.



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WITNESS NAME		
INDIVIDUAL:		
WITNESS NAME: CAROL A ELLIOTT		PHONE NUMBER:
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:
ADDRESS:		
CITY:		STATE: ZIP:
EMAIL: cello@socket.net	ATTENDANCE: Written	SUBMIT DATE: 2/11/2025 11:18 AM
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Missouri needs to get rid of child marriage. This bill will accomplish that.



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WITNESS NAME			
INDIVIDUAL:			
WITNESS NAME: CYDNEY MCKINNIE		PHONE NUMBER:	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:	
ADDRESS:			
CITY:		STATE:	ZIP:
EMAIL: cydneychurchwell@gmail.com	ATTENDANCE: Written		SUBMIT DATE: 2/11/2025 6:44 AM
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WITNESS NAME			
INDIVIDUAL:			
WITNESS NAME: CYNTHIA MAHER		PHONE NUMBER:	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:	
ADDRESS:			
CITY:		STATE:	ZIP:
EMAIL: bfdaddy1981@icloud.com		ATTENDANCE: Written	SUBMIT DATE: 2/11/2025 2:32 PM
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I support HB 1200. Raise the minimum age of marriage in Missouri to 18. Get rid of child marriage.



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WITNESS NAME		
INDIVIDUAL:		
WITNESS NAME: DEBRA REYNOLDS		PHONE NUMBER:
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:
ADDRESS:		
CITY:		STATE: ZIP:
EMAIL: d.a.reynolds@sbcglobal.net	ATTENDANCE: Written	SUBMIT DATE: 2/11/2025 5:59 PM
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WITNESS NAME			
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION:			
WITNESS NAME: DENISE SYLVESTER		PHONE NUMBER:	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME: ZONTA USA CAUCUS		TITLE: CONVENER, ZONTA USA CAUCUS	
ADDRESS:			
CITY: OAK BROOK		STATE: IL	ZIP: 60523
EMAIL: Denise.L.Sylvester@gmail.com	ATTENDANCE: Written	SUBMIT DATE: 2/10/2025 10:40 PM	
THE INFORMATION ON THIS FORM IS PUBLIC RECORD UNDER CHAPTER 610, RSMo.			

Dear Chair Carter, Vice Chair Nicola and Distinguished Committee Members: Zonta International is a 105-year-old organization that seeks to build a better world for women and girls. The Zonta USA Caucus conducts nonpartisan advocacy for women and girls representing over 800 Zonta Clubs in the USA, including 3 clubs in Missouri: St. Louis, Jefferson City, and Cape Girardeau. Zonta International is part of the National Coalition to End Child Marriage, led by Unchained at Last, and we have been educating the public on the dangerous lifelong consequences of child marriage along with UNICEF USA since 2018. We are very pleased you are holding a hearing on HB 1200. Child marriage is an urgent problem in Missouri as children as young as 16 are allowed to marry. We strongly urge you to vote "YES" on HB 1200. Dangers in the Current Law • Missouri law allows marriage at 16. Marriage before age 18 creates a horrific legal trap. Even highly mature teens can easily be forced or coerced into marrying and or forced to stay in a marriage before they turn 18 and attain the rights of adulthood. • Minors cannot easily retain an attorney to help them with their complex legal needs, because most contracts with children, including retainer agreements, are voidable. In our experience, lawyers are reluctant to take on minors as clients based on a voidable retainer agreement. • As minors cannot bring a legal action in their own name, a 16-year-old cannot seek a protective order if their spouse becomes abusive. Perhaps most shockingly, a minor who marries another minor is not even allowed to file independently for divorce. Alarming Statistics in Missouri • 8,289 minors were married in Missouri between 2000 and 2022. • 78% were girls wed to adult men an average of 4.03 years older. • Between 2000 and 2021, it is estimated that 900 marriages occurred with a spousal age difference that would have been considered a sex crime outside of marriage. Devastating Lifetime Consequences of Child Marriage • Child marriage destroys every aspect of a child's life: health, education, economic opportunities, freedom, physical safety, and increases their risk of experiencing violence. The U.S. State Department calls all marriages before 18 a "human rights abuse." • Teens can easily be forced into marriage or forced to stay in a marriage before they turn 18. Even at 16 or 17, they cannot easily leave home, enter a domestic violence shelter, retain an attorney, or bring a legal action such as a divorce or for a protective order. • Marriage before 18 results in divorce 70% to 80% of the time. Simple Legislative Solution: HB 1200 costs nothing, harms no one and saves girls from a human rights abuse. Passing HB 1200 sets the marriage age at 18 and eliminates the dangerous loopholes that allow child marriage in Missouri. Other states are passing the same legislation. Learn more about the child marriage problem happening here in the United States at: www.unchainedatlast.org Zonta USA Caucus engages in non-partisan advocacy to build a better world for women and girls. You can make a difference in the lives of children by ending child marriage. Respectfully, Zonta USA Caucus <https://zontausa.org/> hello@zontausa.org Zonta International District

1Zonta International District 2Zonta International District 3Zonta International District 4Zonta
International District 5Zonta International District 6Zonta International District 7- Zonta Club
of St. Louis- Zonta Club of Jefferson City- Zonta Club of Capers Girardeau Zonta International
District 8Zonta International District 9Zonta International District 10Zonta International District 11Zonta
International District 12Zonta International District 15



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WITNESS NAME		
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION:		
WITNESS NAME: DRE FIELDS (ON BEHALF OF LEGISLATIVE CHAMPIONS)		PHONE NUMBER: 516-592-0643
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME: UNCHAINED AT LAST (ON BEHALF OF LEGISLATIVE CHAMPIONS)		TITLE: POLICY MANAGER
ADDRESS:		
CITY: BROOKLYN	STATE: NY	ZIP: 11221
EMAIL: dre@unchainedatlast.org	ATTENDANCE: Written	SUBMIT DATE: 2/7/2025 9:35 AM
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Testimony in Support of HB1200 Presented to the Missouri House Committee on Children and Families



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WITNESS NAME		
INDIVIDUAL:		
WITNESS NAME: EA FRANKLIN		PHONE NUMBER:
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:
ADDRESS:		
CITY:		STATE: ZIP:
EMAIL: eafrank711@gmail.com	ATTENDANCE: Written	SUBMIT DATE: 2/10/2025 8:06 PM
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I favor this bill and thank the sponsor for bringing it forward.



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WITNESS NAME		
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION:		
WITNESS NAME: ELISA CARDNELL		PHONE NUMBER:
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME: SERVICE WOMEN's ACTION NETWORK		TITLE: PRESIDENT AND CEO
ADDRESS:		
CITY: WASHINGTON	STATE: DC	ZIP: 20005
EMAIL: dre@unchainedatlast.org	ATTENDANCE: Written	SUBMIT DATE: 2/7/2025 9:40 AM
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WITNESS NAME			
REGISTERED LOBBYIST:			
WITNESS NAME: FRAIDY REISS		PHONE NUMBER: 732-995-9861	
REPRESENTING: UNCHAINED AT LAST		TITLE:	
ADDRESS: 208 LENOX AVE #189			
CITY: WESTFIELD		STATE: NJ	ZIP: 07090
EMAIL: dre@unchainedatlast.org	ATTENDANCE: Written	SUBMIT DATE: 2/7/2025 9:12 AM	

THE INFORMATION ON THIS FORM IS PUBLIC RECORD UNDER CHAPTER 610, RSMo.

Chair Jones, Vice Chair Peters, Ranking Member Proudie and Distinguished Committee Members: Unchained At Last is a survivor-led nonprofit working to end forced and child marriage in Missouri and across the United States through direct services and systems change. We at Unchained, and our many allies in the Missouri Coalition to End Child Marriage that we convene, urge the state legislature to pass HB1200 and eliminate the archaic, harmful practice of child marriage. The marriage age is 18,1 but the law includes an alarming loophole: a parent may enter a 16- or 17-year-old into marriage with nothing more than a notarized signature.2 This loophole became law in August 2018;3 previously, a parent could marry off a child of any age, with a requirement for judicial approval if the child were aged 14 or younger. The 2018 law change was a good first step, but it did not go far enough. The loophole continues to disempower and seriously endanger minors: Some 88% of the minors who married before the 2018 law change were aged 16 or 17.4 Thus the 2018 law change failed to protect 88% of those impacted by child marriage. Indeed, minors have continued to be entered into marriage in Missouri at an alarming rate under the new law, including 282 minors wed between 2019 and 2022.5 The law does not seek any input from a teen whose parent “consents” to their marriage, and it provides no recourse for a teen whose own parent is forcing them to marry. We have found – as we provide crucial services to forced and child marriage survivors across the U.S. – that parents almost always play a critical role in facilitating a forced marriage. “Consent” is often coercion. And we have seen repeatedly that even when a teen sobs openly and begs for help, the clerk is powerless to intervene, and the teen is powerless to prevent the marriage license from being issued. The 2018 law does not allow a parent to marry off their 16- or 17-year-old to a spouse aged 21 or older.6 While this marks a great improvement over the prior law, which created a workaround for statutory rape laws,7 this age-difference limit does nothing to prevent the forced marriage of minors nor to mitigate the harms that come from child marriage: The age-difference limit does not decrease a minor’s risk of being forced into marriage. “Close in age” exceptions might make sense in the context of statutory rape, because studies show sex between a minor and a partner who is close in age is less likely to be coercive than sex between a minor and a much older adult.8 However, in our experience, when a child is forced to marry, the primary facilitators are most likely their own parents. Thus the power imbalance of concern is between the minor and the parents, not the child and the spouse. The age-difference limit does not mitigate the harms of child marriage. Marriage before 18 produces such devastating consequences for girls that it is considered a “human rights abuse.”9 The dire nature of this human rights abuse’s consequences is no less severe if a girl marries someone close to her own age.10 Teens might be automatically emancipated upon marriage.11 If that is the case, that means child marriage terminates parents’ financial obligation to their teen child,12 regardless of the teen’s level of financial independence. Automatic emancipation through marriage without regard to financial status

can force a minor to become financially dependent on their spouse – and financial dependence is both a risk factor for domestic violence¹³ and a common reason abuse survivors feel they cannot leave an abusive home.¹⁴ Automatic emancipation can lead to teen homelessness, especially since 70% to 80% of marriages before age 18 end in divorce.¹⁵ Automatic emancipation based on marriage also creates a powerful incentive for a parent to force their child into marriage, so the parent can evade a child support obligation or child custody battle. We have seen this happen across the U.S., including a case that recently ended up before the Idaho Supreme Court.¹⁶ (Remember, only one parent’s “consent” is required.¹⁷) The marriage-age laws incentivize and legalize the trafficking of minors under the guise of marriage. Federal law does not set a minimum age for spousal or fiancé visas;¹⁸ instead it defers to the law in the state where the couple will reside.¹⁹ Thus Missouri’s current marriage age laws allow and encourage 16- and 17-year-olds to be legally trafficked for their citizenship, forced to marry adults overseas so the adults can get a visa and path to citizenship. Missouri’s laws also allow and encourage individuals to legally traffic 16- and 17-year-olds from overseas to Missouri as their spouse. This is not a small problem. USCIS approved 8,868 petitions involving minors as young as age 13 for spousal or fiancé entry into the U.S. between 2007 and 2017. The younger party was a girl in 95% of the petitions.²⁰ Child marriage is inherently dangerous: Marriage before age 18 creates a “Kafkaesque” legal trap for minors;²¹ indeed, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights considers all child marriage to be forced marriage.²² Even highly mature teens can easily be forced into marriage or forced to stay in a marriage before they turn 18 and attain the full rights of adulthood:²³ Minors cannot easily escape if their parents are planning an unwanted wedding for them or escape from an abusive spouse, because a minor who leaves home can be labeled a “missing child” or “missing person”²⁴ – which means their information is entered immediately into the Missouri Uniform Law Enforcement System and the National Crime Information Center, disseminated to other law enforcement agencies, reported to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children²⁵ and reported to their school.²⁶ It also means the minor’s birth certificate is flagged,²⁷ as are their school records.²⁸ Where would minors go even if they could escape? An unaccompanied minor aged 16 or 17 may be admitted to a domestic violence shelter only if their parent consents (this can be express consent or implied consent, which includes barring the minor from the home, refusing support or abusing or neglecting the minor).²⁹ Youth shelters are not a viable alternative, because youth shelters across the U.S. typically are not confidential – they must notify parents of the minor’s whereabouts – and they typically house minors for only 21 days while they work on a reunification plan. Minors cannot easily retain an attorney to help them with their complex legal needs, because minors are not “competent to contract” for most purposes, including to enter a retainer agreement, until age 18.³⁰ A retainer agreement with a minor likely would be voidable,³¹ and, in our experience, lawyers are reluctant to take on a minor as a client based on a voidable retainer agreement. Perhaps most shockingly, minors are not allowed to independently bring a legal action³² – which means a minor can be entered into marriage with no input from them and then not allowed to file for divorce in their own name. This outrageous legal setup puts the “lock” in “wedlock.” Note that marriage might emancipate minors, which might give them some rights of adulthood. However: Since Missouri has no statute that lays out the rights of an emancipated minor, it is unclear which rights an emancipated minor can access. What is clear is that any such rights are limited. For example, we do not know of any case law that allows a minor to file for divorce; further, in our experience, domestic violence shelters typically turn away all unaccompanied minors, regardless of emancipation status. Even if married minors had limited rights, they might face difficulties accessing them. Imagine, for example, how a landlord would feel about renting an apartment to a 16- or 17-year-old, even if the teen technically had the right to enter a lease agreement. Crucially, in the case of an unwanted marriage, any limited rights of emancipation would arrive too late, only after a minor has endured the trauma of the forced marriage. Child marriage destroys nearly every aspect of American girls’ lives, including their health, education and economic opportunities³³ and even their physical safety.³⁴ Further, nearly all marriage before age 18 – some 70% to 80% of such marriage – ends in divorce,³⁵ which brings additional hardship. Indeed, the U.S. State Department calls marriage before age 18 a “human rights abuse.”³⁶ The impacts of underage marriage are even more severe for teen mothers. Teen mothers who marry and then divorce are more likely to suffer economic deprivation and instability than teen mothers who stay single – and, as noted above, teen marriage has a 70% to 80% divorce rate.³⁷ Child marriage undermines reproductive and sexual rights. Globally, child marriage is associated with higher rates of sexually transmitted infections including HIV, as well as early and unwanted pregnancies, because child brides often are unable to negotiate safe sex and access to medical care.³⁸ Indeed, individuals in the U.S. who married before age 18 report high rates of unwanted or unplanned pregnancies.³⁹ Child marriage can easily be forced marriage, and in our experience, a forced marriage at any age typically means the loss of reproductive rights, with survivors forced to have unprotected sex and to endure pregnancy and childbirth without their consent. Indeed, Human Rights Watch gives Missouri an F grade on child rights and ranks it 36th out of 50 states – largely because of its marriage-age laws.⁴⁰ Child marriage is happening at an alarming rate: Some

8,289 minors, one as young as 13, were married in Missouri between 2000 and 2022 – including 282 minors wed between 2019 and 2022, under the new law.⁴¹ Some 78% were girls wed to adult men⁴² an average of 3.8 years older.⁴³ Between 2000 and 2018, at least 910 and possibly as many as 1,299 marriages occurred with a spousal age difference that would have met the definition of a sex crime outside of marriage.⁴⁴ (This is no longer legal since the 2018 law passed.) The simple, commonsense solution is a marriage age of 18, no exceptions: Under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, 193 countries – including the U.S. – have promised to end child marriage by year 2030.⁴⁵ States across the U.S. and around the world are keeping this promise by banning all marriage before 18, without exceptions.⁴⁶ Specifically, they are passing legislation that keeps the marriage age at 18 and eliminates any loopholes (#18NoExceptions). Legislation to this effect harms no one, costs nothing and ends a human rights abuse. Waiting until 18 to marry brings obvious benefit, and it does not cause harm, beyond an inconvenience, for teens who are eager to marry but must hold off for a matter of months: A girl is pregnant and wants to co-parent? She and the father can easily co-parent outside of marriage if they both merely sign an affidavit acknowledging paternity⁴⁷ – in which case the father’s insurance and other benefits extend to the baby⁴⁸ and the parent/child relationship is exactly the same as for any other family.⁴⁹ (Again, note that a pregnant teenage girl in the U.S. who marries is highly likely to divorce and then much more likely to suffer economic deprivation and instability than a pregnant girl who stays single, as explained above.) A teen needs financial, healthcare, housing or other resources they cannot get from their parents? We must make options available to teens that do not require them to enter a contractual sexual relationship from which they cannot easily escape. Using a minor’s current financial dependence to justify an early marriage is harmful public policy that sets up the minor for a lifetime of dependence. As noted above, not only does financial dependence contribute to the risk of domestic violence,⁵⁰ but many abuse survivors cite financial dependence as the main reason they felt compelled to stay in a violent home.⁵¹ A teen is in an abusive home and needs an escape? Again, we must make options available to vulnerable teens that do not require them to enter a contractual sexual relationship from which they cannot legally escape. Marriage before 18 is a known driver of domestic violence,⁵² not a solution to it. Right now Missouri, by allowing child marriage, is falling behind the rest of the country and the world. Further, since Missouri does not impose a residency requirement for marriage,⁵³ it risks becoming the “destination site” for child marriage. Missouri must catch up to the rest of the nation and the world by passing HB1200 and banning all marriage before age 18, no exceptions. We must act now to end the archaic, sexist, harmful practice of child marriage.



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WITNESS NAME		
REGISTERED LOBBYIST:		
WITNESS NAME: FRAIDY REISS		PHONE NUMBER:
REPRESENTING: UNCHAINED AT LAST		TITLE:
ADDRESS:		
CITY: WESTFIELD	STATE: NJ	ZIP: 07090
EMAIL: admin@unchainedatlast.org	ATTENDANCE: In-Person	SUBMIT DATE: 2/9/2025 1:59 PM
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WITNESS NAME		
INDIVIDUAL:		
WITNESS NAME: HOLLY THOMPSON REHDER		PHONE NUMBER:
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:
ADDRESS:		
CITY:		STATE: ZIP:
EMAIL: holly@hollyrehder.com	ATTENDANCE: In-Person	SUBMIT DATE: 2/9/2025 1:55 PM
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I am a former State Senator and former teen bride. I sponsored this legislation last session where it passed almost unanimously through the Senate. I intend to tell my story to the committee.



MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WITNESS APPEARANCE FORM

BILL NUMBER: HB 1200		DATE: 2/11/2025
COMMITTEE: Children and Families		
TESTIFYING: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN SUPPORT OF <input type="checkbox"/> IN OPPOSITION TO <input type="checkbox"/> FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES		
WITNESS NAME		
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION:		
WITNESS NAME: JENNIFER ELMORE		PHONE NUMBER:
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME: PROTECT OUR DEFENDERS		TITLE: CEO
ADDRESS: 1058 N. TAMIAMI TRAIL, STE 108-240		
CITY: SARASOTA	STATE: FL	ZIP: 34236
EMAIL: dre@unchainedatlast.org	ATTENDANCE: Written	SUBMIT DATE: 2/7/2025 9:29 AM

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Chair Jones, Vice Chair Peters, Ranking Member Proudie and Distinguished Committee Members: Protect Our Defenders is the pre-eminent national human rights organization dedicated to ending sexual violence, victim retaliation, misogyny, sexual prejudice, and racism in the military and combating a culture that has allowed it to persist. We honor, support, and give voice to survivors of military sexual violence. We seek reform to ensure all service members are provided a safe and respectful work environment free from misogyny and racism, and have access to a fair, impartially administered system of justice. In order to fulfill our mission, we provide pro bono legal services to survivors of military sexual assault, advocate for military sexual assault reform, and publish and proliferate ground-breaking reports that expose the crises of sexual assault and racial discrimination in the military. Since our founding in 2011, we have assisted a number of child victims of military sexual assault and their families, who are left devastated following incidents that no child should ever have to endure. In FY 2020 alone, the DoD's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO) reported that there were 209 unique victims of child sexual abuse, 92.3% of which were female, and 7.7% were male.¹ When it came to our attention that some lawmakers have resisted ending child marriage so that an active duty servicemember might be able to marry a child for the child to be able to benefit from spousal death benefits, we were left deeply shaken. The military has a crisis on its hands in the form of sexual assault, which has been acknowledged by the Secretary of Defense², military leaders such as General Mark Milley³, and the Commander in Chief, President Joe Biden⁴. Allowing for the perpetuation of child marriage under the guise that children stand to benefit is a fallacy. Under the Survivor Benefit Plan, servicemembers have the ability to designate a recipient for their death benefits, and that recipient is NOT limited only to spouses, thus enabling a servicemember to designate their benefits to whomever he or she desires. We fear that continuing to proliferate the narrative that a servicemember should be allowed to marry children to ensure that child receives spousal benefits will enable those to wish to prey on children to do so under the guise of a legal union. This is very dangerous in any profession and in any setting, but especially within the U.S. military, which is already contending with a sexual assault crisis it cannot control. Thank you for your time and consideration.
 Col. Don Christensen (USAF (Ret))



MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WITNESS APPEARANCE FORM

BILL NUMBER: HB 1200		DATE: 2/11/2025
COMMITTEE: Children and Families		
TESTIFYING: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN SUPPORT OF <input type="checkbox"/> IN OPPOSITION TO <input type="checkbox"/> FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES		
WITNESS NAME		
INDIVIDUAL:		
WITNESS NAME: JENNIFER SHIRLEY		PHONE NUMBER:
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:
ADDRESS:		
CITY:		STATE: ZIP:
EMAIL: jreimer78@hotmail.com	ATTENDANCE: Written	SUBMIT DATE: 2/11/2025 1:30 PM
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Please vote yes on HB1200. I am not sure why this would need any other explanation other than the fact that anyone under the age of 18 is still too young to make a decision about marriage. We must put this no brainer law on the books in MO and make it official that the legal age of marriage must be at least 18 years of age.



MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WITNESS APPEARANCE FORM

BILL NUMBER: HB 1200		DATE: 2/11/2025	
COMMITTEE: Children and Families			
TESTIFYING: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN SUPPORT OF <input type="checkbox"/> IN OPPOSITION TO <input type="checkbox"/> FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES			
WITNESS NAME			
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION:			
WITNESS NAME: JESSICA HILL		PHONE NUMBER: 573-382-8368	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME: ZONTA CLUB OF CAPE GIRARDEAU		TITLE: PRESIDENT-ELECT	
ADDRESS: 1316 VANTAGE DRIVE			
CITY: CAPE GIRARDEAU		STATE: MO	ZIP: 63701
EMAIL: jessica.hill@semosafehouse.org	ATTENDANCE: Written	SUBMIT DATE: 2/7/2025 3:08 PM	

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Written Testimony Re: HB 1200 – Modifies Provisions Relating to the Age of Marriage Sponsor: Rep. Reuter Committee: Children and Families Submitted on Behalf of: Zonta Club of Cape Girardeau, P.O. Box 204, Cape Girardeau, MO 63702

The Zonta Club of Cape Girardeau is a member of Zonta International and the Zonta USA Caucus. The Zonta USA Caucus is in turn a member of the National Coalition to End Child Marriage in the United States, working to end child marriage in our country. Child marriage, or marriage before age 18, was legal in all 50 U.S. states as of 2017. Thanks to relentless advocacy, that is changing. Delaware and New Jersey in 2018 became the first two states to end this human rights abuse, followed by American Samoa in 2018, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Pennsylvania and Minnesota in 2020, Rhode Island and New York in 2021, Massachusetts in 2022 and Vermont, Connecticut and Michigan in 2023. According to research from the advocacy organization Unchained At Last, nearly 300,000 children, some as young as 10, were married in the U.S. between 2000 and 2018. Most were girls wed to adult men. Child marriage creates a nightmarish legal trap, due to minors' limited legal rights. They cannot easily leave home, enter a domestic violence shelter, retain an attorney or even file for divorce. Further, child marriage is recognized as a human rights abuse that destroys nearly every aspect of an American girl's life. Here are the three main reasons we must end child marriage in the U.S.:

- 1. Child marriage can easily be forced marriage. The age of majority, when children become legal adults and get the rights of adulthood, is 18 or higher in every U.S. state. Children who have not yet reached the age of majority have limited legal rights and therefore can easily be forced into marriage or forced to stay in a marriage. They face overwhelming legal and practical barriers if they try to leave home to escape a forced marriage, get help from an advocate, enter a domestic violence shelter or retain an attorney. Perhaps most shockingly, children typically are not allowed to initiate a legal proceeding – such as seeking a protective order or even filing for divorce – unless they act through a guardian or other representative. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights categorizes all child marriage as forced marriage.**
- 2. Child marriage negatively impacts nearly every aspect of American children's lives, including their health, education and economic opportunities. It even undermines their physical safety: Individuals in the U.S. who were married before age 18 report high rates of physical, sexual, financial or emotional abuse during their marriage as well as unwanted or unplanned pregnancies. The impacts of underage marriage are even more severe for teen mothers. Teen mothers who marry and then divorce are more likely to suffer economic deprivation and instability than teen mothers who stay single – and marriage before age 18 has a 70-80% divorce rate. Child marriage is recognized globally as a harmful practice that disempowers women and girls in particular and hinders gender equality. The U.S. State Department has called child marriage a human rights abuse.**
- 3. Child marriage undermines statutory rape laws. In most states and under federal law, sex with a child that would otherwise be considered**

rape – in some cases, felony rape – becomes legal within marriage. In those situations, the marriage license becomes a “get out of jail free” card for a child rapist. In some states, statutory rape remains a crime within marriage. The marriage is legal, but sex within the marriage is rape. In those situations, the state that issues the marriage license sends a child home to be raped. At least 60,000 child marriages in the U.S. between 2000 and 2018 occurred at an age or with a spousal age difference that should have been considered a sex crime. Of those child marriages, 88% gave a rapist a “get out of jail free” card, while 12% sent a child home to be raped. Either way, the marriage license made a mockery of statutory rape laws. Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of House Bill 1200. We urge you to vote the bill out of committee and send it to the House Floor. Respectfully Submitted, Jessica Hill, Executive Director, Safe House of Southeast Missouri and President-Elect, Zonta Club of Cape Girardeau, 1316 Vantage Drive, Cape Girardeau, MO 63701, 573-382-8368, jessica.hill@semosafehouse.org



MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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BILL NUMBER: HB 1200		DATE: 2/11/2025
COMMITTEE: Children and Families		
TESTIFYING: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN SUPPORT OF <input type="checkbox"/> IN OPPOSITION TO <input type="checkbox"/> FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES		
WITNESS NAME		
REGISTERED LOBBYIST:		
WITNESS NAME: JESSICA PETRIE		PHONE NUMBER: 573-635-6092
REPRESENTING: MO NETWORK AGAINST CHILD ABUSE		TITLE:
ADDRESS: PO BOX 1805		
CITY: JEFFERSON CITY		STATE: MO
		ZIP: 65102
EMAIL: jessica@wintonpolicygroup.com	ATTENDANCE: In-Person	SUBMIT DATE: 2/11/2025 8:58 AM
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MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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BILL NUMBER: HB 1200		DATE: 2/11/2025
COMMITTEE: Children and Families		
TESTIFYING: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN SUPPORT OF <input type="checkbox"/> IN OPPOSITION TO <input type="checkbox"/> FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES		
WITNESS NAME		
INDIVIDUAL:		
WITNESS NAME: JOANNE SCHRADER		PHONE NUMBER:
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:
ADDRESS:		
CITY:		STATE: ZIP:
EMAIL: crazyhorse1876@gmail.com	ATTENDANCE: Written	SUBMIT DATE: 2/6/2025 6:35 PM
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Marriage is a lifetime commitment where an individual promises fidelity to their spouse for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad. Only adults have sufficient maturity to make such a vow. I strongly feely there should be a provision that requires pre-marriage counseling and a waiting period for all couples before they obtain a marriage license. This would help reduce the divorce rate.



MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WITNESS APPEARANCE FORM

BILL NUMBER: HB 1200		DATE: 2/11/2025
COMMITTEE: Children and Families		
TESTIFYING: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN SUPPORT OF <input type="checkbox"/> IN OPPOSITION TO <input type="checkbox"/> FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES		
WITNESS NAME		
INDIVIDUAL:		
WITNESS NAME: JOSHUA WILCUTT		PHONE NUMBER:
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:
ADDRESS:		
CITY:		STATE: ZIP:
EMAIL: joshua.wilcutt@live.com	ATTENDANCE: Written	SUBMIT DATE: 2/11/2025 10:56 AM
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MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WITNESS APPEARANCE FORM

BILL NUMBER: HB 1200		DATE: 2/11/2025	
COMMITTEE: Children and Families			
TESTIFYING: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN SUPPORT OF <input type="checkbox"/> IN OPPOSITION TO <input type="checkbox"/> FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES			
WITNESS NAME			
INDIVIDUAL:			
WITNESS NAME: KORTNIE HUDDLESTON		PHONE NUMBER:	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:	
ADDRESS:			
CITY:		STATE:	ZIP:
EMAIL: kortniehuddleston@gmail.com	ATTENDANCE: Written		SUBMIT DATE: 2/11/2025 9:00 PM
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I urge you to support HB 1200, which raises the age of marriage to 18. Child marriage poses a grave threat to the well-being of children, with Missouri ranking 16th in child marriage per capita. The General Assembly has consistently prioritized child protection, making it imperative that we take legislative action. Shockingly, between 2000 and 2018, nearly 300,000 children under 18 were legally married in the US, disproportionately girls wed to adult men. This alarming trend exposes these girls to heightened risks of serious health issues, intimate partner violence, and mental health disorders, severely impacting their education and future earning potential. The repercussions extend to teenage mothers, for whom marriage and subsequent divorce drastically increase the likelihood of poverty. The trauma inflicted by child marriage is not limited to individuals; it imposes a significant societal cost. By raising the marriage age to 18, we uphold children's rights and protect their innocence and potential. Envision a 16-year-old girl, brimming with dreams and aspirations, burdened with the responsibilities of marriage and potential motherhood. This is not the future we should envision for our daughters. Thus, raising the marriage age is crucial for safeguarding our children and ensuring their well-being and future prospects. Child marriage, defined as marriage under 18, has been recognized internationally as a human rights violation by the United Nations. The United States Department of State similarly views forced marriage, especially involving minors, as a form of child abuse and a human rights abuse. Until 2017, child marriage was legal in all 50 states, but increased awareness and advocacy have shed light on its dangers. Child marriage essentially coerces minors into dangerous unions, exacerbated by legal and practical barriers that hinder their escape from abusive situations. Moreover, child marriage undermines statutory rape laws, as marriage licenses can shield child rapists from prosecution, endangering the child's immediate safety and future well-being. This practice disempowers women and girls, making them more vulnerable to domestic and sexual violence. I fully support legislative efforts to combat child marriage and urge you to do the same.



MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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COMMITTEE: Children and Families		
TESTIFYING: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN SUPPORT OF <input type="checkbox"/> IN OPPOSITION TO <input type="checkbox"/> FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES		
WITNESS NAME		
INDIVIDUAL:		
WITNESS NAME: MANDY HAVLIK		PHONE NUMBER:
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:
ADDRESS:		
CITY:	STATE:	ZIP:
EMAIL: havlikmandy@gmail.com	ATTENDANCE: Written	SUBMIT DATE: 2/6/2025 5:22 PM

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Unchained At Last is a survivor-led nonprofit working to end forced and child marriage in Missouri and across the United States through direct services and systems change. We at Unchained, and our many allies in the Missouri Coalition to End Child Marriage that we convene, urge the state legislature to pass SB66 and eliminate the archaic, harmful practice of child marriage. The marriage age is 18, but the law includes an alarming loophole: a parent may enter a 16- or 17-year-old into marriage with nothing more than a notarized signature. This loophole became law in August 2018; previously, a parent could marry off a child of any age, with a requirement for judicial approval if the child were aged 14 or younger. The 2018 law change was a good first step, but it did not go far enough. The loophole continues to disempower and seriously endanger minors: • Some 88% of the minors who married before the 2018 law change were aged 16 or 17. Thus the 2018 law change failed to protect 88% of those impacted by child marriage. Indeed, minors have continued to be entered into marriage in Missouri at an alarming rate under the new law, including 282 minors wed between 2019 and 2022. The law does not seek any input from a teen whose parent “consents” to their marriage, and it provides no recourse for a teen whose own parent is forcing them to marry. We have found – as we provide crucial services to forced and child marriage survivors across the U.S. – that parents almost always play a critical role in facilitating a forced marriage. “Consent” is often coercion. And we have seen repeatedly that even when a teen sobersopely and begs for help, the clerk is powerless to intervene, and the teen is powerless to prevent the marriage license from being issued. • The 2018 law does not allow a parent to marry off their 16- or 17-year-old to a spouse aged 21 or older. While this marks a great improvement over the prior law, which created a workaround for statutory rape laws, this age-difference limit does nothing to prevent the forced marriage of minors nor to mitigate the harms that come from child marriage: 1 Revised Statutes of Missouri (RSMo) § 451.090.2 RSMo § 451.090. Note that only the custodial parent or guardian’s “consent” is required. 3 SB655, sponsored by Sen. Scott Sifton, passed in 2018. 4 Based on Unchained’s analysis of marriage-certificate data retrieved from the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services. 5 Based on Unchained’s analysis of marriage-certificate data retrieved from the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services. 6 RSMo § 451.090 (1). 7 RSMo § 566.034: A person aged 21 or older who has sex with a person aged 16 or younger commits statutory rape. However, per RSMo § 566.034: Statutory rape is not a crime if the perpetrator first marries the child. Thus the age-difference limit does not decrease a minor’s risk of being forced into marriage. “Close in age” exceptions might make sense in the context of statutory rape, because studies show sex between a minor and a partner who is close in age is less likely to be coercive than sex between a minor and a much older adult. 8 However, in our experience, when a child is forced to marry, the primary facilitators are most likely their own parents. Thus the power imbalance of concern is between the minor and the parents, not the child and the spouse. o The age-difference limit does not mitigate the harms of child marriage. Marriage before 18 produces such devastating consequences for

girls that it is considered a “human rights abuse.”⁹ The dire nature of this human rights abuse’s consequences is no less severe if a girl marries someone close to her own age.¹⁰ Teens might be automatically emancipated upon marriage.¹¹ If that is the case, that means child marriage terminates parents’ financial obligation to their teen child,¹² regardless of the teen’s level of financial independence. Automatic emancipation through marriage without regard to financial status can force a minor to become financially dependent on their spouse – and financial dependence is both a risk factor for domestic violence¹³ and a common reason abuse survivors feel they cannot leave an abusive home.¹⁴ Automatic emancipation can lead to teen homelessness, especially since 70% to 80% of marriages before age 18 end in divorce.¹⁵ marriage-age law before 2018, which allowed individuals aged 21 or older to marry children of any age, offered a “get out of jail free” card to perpetrators of statutory rape.⁸ Tara Richards & Catherine Marcum, eds., *Sexual Victimization: Then and Now* pp. 108–09 (1st ed. 2014); Sarah Koon-Magnin et al., *Partner Age Differences, Educational Contexts And Adolescent Female Sexual Activity, Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* (18 August 2010), <https://www.guttmacher.org/journals/psrh/2010/08/partner-age-differences-educational-contexts-and-adolescent-female-sexual>.⁹ U.S. Department of State, et al., *United States Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls* (March 2016), <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/254904.pdf>.¹⁰ In many states, children are emancipated upon marriage (based on Unchained’s analysis of marriage-age laws; also see, for example: National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, *Alone Without a Home: A State-By-State Review of Laws Affecting Unaccompanied Youth* [September 2012], nlchp.org/Alone_Without_A_Home). Thus studies of married children in the U.S. necessarily include emancipated minors.¹¹ Whether marriage is an automatic emancipator is unclear, since emancipation is governed by case law, not statute, and the case law is contradictory. See *Sutton v. Schwartz*, 860 S.W.2d 833, 835 (Mo. App. 1993) (citing *Bopp v. Bopp*, 671 S.W.2d 348, 351 (Mo. App. 1984)): Emancipation “may occur in one of three ways: express parental consent, implied parental consent, or the child’s change of status in the eyes of society” – and marriage is one of the “most common” emancipators. However, also see *Gordon v. Ary*, 358 S.W.2d 81, 83, 84 (Mo. Ct. of App. 1962): One party argued that “marriage of a minor child does not in all cases emancipate the child.” The court did not resolve the question but assumed the child was emancipated.¹² RSMo § 452.370(4).¹³ Robert Bornstein, *The Complex Relationship Between Dependency and Domestic Violence: Converging Psychological Factors and Social Forces*, *The American Psychologist* (September 2006), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16953747>.¹⁴ Nancy Salamone, *Domestic Violence and Financial Dependency*, *Forbes* (2 September 2010), <https://www.forbes.com/2010/09/02/women-money-domestic-violence-forbes-woman-net-worth-personal-finance.html>.¹⁵ Vivian Hamilton, *The Age of Marital Capacity: Reconsidering Civil Recognition of Adolescent Marriage*, *William & Mary Law School Scholarship Repository* (2012), <https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/facpubs/1430>. Automatic emancipation based on marriage also creates a powerful incentive for a parent to force their child into marriage, so the parent can evade a child support obligation or child custody battle. We have seen this happen across the U.S., including a case that recently ended up before the Idaho Supreme Court.¹⁶ (Remember, only one parent’s “consent” is required.)¹⁷ The marriage-age laws incentivize and legalize the trafficking of minors under the guise of marriage. Federal law does not set a minimum age for spousal or fiancé visas;¹⁸ instead it defers to the law in the state where the couple will reside.¹⁹ Thus Missouri’s current marriage age laws allow and encourage 16- and 17-year-olds to be legally trafficked for their citizenship, forced to marry adults overseas so the adults can get a visa and path to citizenship. Missouri’s laws also allow and encourage individuals to legally traffic 16- and 17-year-olds from overseas to Missouri as their spouse. This is not a small problem. USCIS approved 8,868 petitions involving minors as young as age 13 for spousal or fiancé entry into the U.S. between 2007 and 2017. The younger party was a girl in 95% of the petitions.²⁰ Child marriage is inherently dangerous: • Marriage before age 18 creates a “Kafkaesque” legal trap for minors;²¹ indeed, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights considers all child marriage to be forced marriage.²² Even highly mature teens can easily be forced into marriage or forced to stay in a marriage before they turn 18 and attain the full rights of adulthood:²³ • Minors cannot easily escape if their parents are planning an unwanted wedding for them or escape from an abusive spouse, because a minor who leaves home can be labeled a “missing child” or “missing person”²⁴ – which means their information is entered immediately into the Missouri Uniform Law Enforcement System and the National Crime Information Center, disseminated to other law enforcement agencies, reported to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children²⁵ and reported to their school.²⁶ It also means the minor’s birth certificate is flagged,²⁷ as are their school records.²⁸ *16 Carver v. Hornish*, No. 49320 (Idaho 2022). See: <https://isc.idaho.gov/appeals/49320.pdf>.¹⁷ RSMo § 451.090. ¹⁸ 8 U.S. Code § 1101. ¹⁹ U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *How the U.S. Immigration System Encourages Child Marriages* (11 January 2019), <https://www.hsdl.org/c/abstract/?docid=820021>. ²⁰ U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *How the U.S. Immigration System Encourages Child Marriages* (11 January 2019),

<https://www.hsdl.org/c/abstract/?docid=820021>. (Note that the State Department ultimately rejected the two petitions involving 13-year-olds.)²¹ Nicholas Kristof, A 14-Year-Old Bride, Wed to Her Rapist, Playing on a Jungle Gym, New York Times (19 June 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/19/opinion/sunday/child-marriage-rape.html>.²² United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Child and Forced Marriage, Including in Humanitarian Settings, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/women/child-and-forced-marriage-including-humanitarian-settings>.²³ RSMo § 453.015: The age of adulthood is 18 (and 21 for anyone in the custody of the children's division).²⁴ RSMo § 43.400.²⁵ RSMo § 43.401.²⁶ RSMo § 43.406.²⁷ RSMo § 43.407.²⁸ RSMo § 43.408.o Where would minors go even if they could escape? An unaccompanied minor aged 16 or 17 may be admitted to a domestic violence shelter only if their parent consents (this can be express consent or implied consent, which includes barring the minor from the home, refusing support or abusing or neglecting the minor).²⁹ Youth shelters are not a viable alternative, because youth shelters across the U.S. typically are not confidential – they must notify parents of the minor's whereabouts – and they typically house minors for only 21 days while they work on a reunification plan.o Minors cannot easily retain an attorney to help them with their complex legal needs, because minors are not “competent to contract” for most purposes, including to enter a retainer agreement, until age 18.³⁰ A retainer agreement with a minor likely would be voidable,³¹ and, in our experience, lawyers are reluctant to take on a minor as a client based on a voidable retainer agreement.o Perhaps most shockingly, minors are not allowed to independently bring a legal action³² – which means a minor can be entered into marriage with no input from them and then not allowed to file for divorce in their own name. This outrageous legal setup puts the “lock” in “wedlock.”o Note that marriage might emancipate minors, which might give them some rights of adulthood. However: Since Missouri has no statute that lays out the rights of an emancipated minor, it is unclear which rights an emancipated minor can access. What is clear is that any such rights are limited. For example, we do not know of any case law that allows a minor to file for divorce; further, in our experience, domestic violence shelters typically turn away all unaccompanied minors, regardless of emancipation status.? Even if married minors had limited rights, they might face difficulties accessing them. Imagine, for example, how a landlord would feel about renting an apartment to a 16- or 17-year-old, even if the teen technically had the right to enter a lease agreement.? Crucially, in the case of an unwanted marriage, any limited rights of emancipation would arrive too late, only after a minor has endured the trauma of the forced marriage.²⁹ RSMo § 431.056.³⁰ RSMo § 431.055. Note that, per RSMo § 431.056, minors may contract for certain purposes under certain conditions, but these purposes do not include retainer agreements.³¹ Merrick v. Stephens, 337 S.W.2d 713, 717 (Mo. Ct. of App. 1960); see also Nelson v. Browning, 391 S.W.2d 881, 884 (Mo. 1965): “Generally speaking, the contracts of an infant are voidable.” (The minor was “entitled to disaffirm and repudiate the release at any time during her minority and within a reasonable time after coming of age.”) Also see RSMo § 431.060: “No action shall be maintained whereby to charge any person upon any debt contracted before such person becomes eighteen years of age” unless the person takes certain actions.³² Missouri Supreme Court Rules (Sup. Ct. R.) 52.02(a): “Civil actions by minors may be commenced and prosecuted only by a duly appointed guardian of such minor or, if there is no such guardian, by a next friend appointed in such civil action.”• Child marriage destroys nearly every aspect of American girls' lives, including their health, education and economic opportunities³³ and even their physical safety.³⁴ Further, nearly all marriage before age 18 – some 70% to 80% of such marriage – ends in divorce,³⁵ which brings additional hardship. Indeed, the U.S. State Department calls marriage before age 18 a “human rights abuse.”³⁶ The impacts of underage marriage are even more severe for teen mothers. Teen mothers who marry and then divorce are more likely to suffer economic deprivation and instability than teen mothers who stay single – and, as noted above, teen marriage has a 70% to 80% divorce rate.³⁷• Child marriage undermines reproductive and sexual rights. Globally, child marriage is associated with higher rates of sexually transmitted infections including HIV, as well as early and unwanted pregnancies, because child brides often are unable to negotiate safe sex and access to medical care.³⁸ Indeed, individuals in the U.S. who married before age 18 report high rates of unwanted or unplanned pregnancies.³⁹ Child marriage can easily be forced marriage, and in our experience, a forced marriage at any age typically means the loss of reproductive rights, with survivors forced to have unprotected sex and to endure pregnancy and childbirth without their consent. Indeed, Human Rights Watch gives Missouri an F grade on child rights and ranks it 36th out of 50 states – largely because of its marriage-age laws.⁴⁰ Child marriage is happening at an alarming rate:• Some 8,289 minors, one as young as 13, were married in Missouri between 2000 and 2022 – including 282 minors wed between 2019 and 2022, under the new law.⁴¹• Fraidy Reiss, Child Marriage in the United States: Prevalence and Implications, Journal of Adolescent Health (December 2021), [https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(21\)00341-4/fulltext](https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(21)00341-4/fulltext).³⁴ Individuals in the U.S. who were married before age 18 report high rates of physical, sexual, financial or emotional abuse during their marriage as well as unwanted or unplanned pregnancies. See: Aditi Wahi, et al., The Lived Experience of Child Marriage in the United States, Social Work Public Health (12

February 2019), <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30747055>. Note that this is consistent with global trends. See, for example: Rachel Kidman, Child Marriage and Intimate Partner Violence: A Comparative Study of 34 Countries, *International Journal of Epidemiology* (April 2017), <https://academic.oup.com/ije/article/46/2/662/2417355>.³⁵ Vivian Hamilton, The Age of Marital Capacity: Reconsidering Civil Recognition of Adolescent Marriage, *William & Mary Law School Scholarship Repository* (2012), <https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/facpubs/1430>.³⁶ U.S. Department of State, et al., United States Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls (March 2016), <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/254904.pdf>.³⁷ Vivian Hamilton, The Age of Marital Capacity: Reconsidering Civil Recognition of Adolescent Marriage, *William & Mary Law School Scholarship Repository* (2012), <https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/facpubs/1430>.³⁸ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Ending Child Marriage: Progress and Prospects (July 2014), <https://data.unicef.org/resources/ending-child-marriage-progress-and-prospects>.³⁹ Aditi Wahi, et al., The Lived Experience of Child Marriage in the United States, *Social Work Public Health* (12 February 2019), <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30747055>.⁴⁰ Human Rights Watch, How Do US States Measure Up on Child Rights?, <https://www.hrw.org/feature/2022/09/13/how-do-states-measure-up-child-rights>.⁴¹ Fraidy Reiss, Child Marriage in the United States: Prevalence and Implications, *Journal of Adolescent Health* (December 2021), [https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(21\)00341-4/fulltext](https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(21)00341-4/fulltext). Data for 2019 and later based on Unchained's analysis of marriage-certificate data retrieved from the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services. (Note that marriage as young as 13 used to be allowed before the 2018 law change.)⁴² Some 78% were girls wed to adult men⁴³ an average of 3.8 years older.⁴⁴ Between 2000 and 2018, at least 910 and possibly as many as 1,299 marriages occurred with a spousal age difference that would have met the definition of a sex crime outside of marriage.⁴⁵ (This is no longer legal since the 2018 law passed.) The simple, commonsense solution is a marriage age of 18, no exceptions: Under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, 193 countries – including the U.S. – have promised to end child marriage by year 2030.⁴⁶ States across the U.S. and around the world are keeping this promise by banning all marriage before 18, without exceptions.⁴⁷ Specifically, they are passing legislation that keeps the marriage age at 18 and eliminates any loopholes (#18NoExceptions). Legislation to this effect harms no one, costs nothing and ends all human rights abuse. Waiting until 18 to marry brings obvious benefit, and it does not cause harm, beyond an inconvenience, for teens who are eager to marry but must hold off for a matter of months:⁴⁸ • A girl is pregnant and wants to co-parent? She and the father can easily co-parent outside of marriage if they both merely sign an affidavit acknowledging paternity⁴⁹ – in which case the father's insurance and other benefits extend to the baby⁵⁰ and the parent/child relationship is exactly the same as for any other family.⁵¹ (Again, note that a pregnant teenage girl in the U.S. who marries is highly likely to divorce and then much more likely to suffer economic deprivation and instability than a pregnant girl who stays single, as explained above.) • A teen needs financial, healthcare, housing or other resources they cannot get from their parents? We must make options available to teens that do not require them to enter a contractual sexual relationship from which they cannot easily escape. Using a minor's current financial dependence to justify an early marriage is harmful public policy that sets up the minor for a lifetime of dependence. As noted above, not only does financial⁵² Based on Unchained's analysis of marriage-certificate data retrieved from the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services.⁵³ Based on McGill University's analysis of marriage-certificate data Unchained retrieved.⁵⁴ Alissa Koski, et. Al., Child Marriage or Statutory Rape?, *Journal of Adolescent Health* (March 2022), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1054139X21005528>.⁵⁵ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development (2015), <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5>: Goal 5 is, "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls." Target 5.3 is, "Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation." Indicator 5.3.1 is, "Proportion of women aged 20-24 years who were married or in a union before age 15 and before age 18."⁵⁶ Unchained At Last, Child Marriage Legislation: Progress Map, <https://www.unchainedatlast.org/child-marriage-in-the-u-s/#progress>.⁵⁷ RSMo § 193.215 (6).⁵⁸ RSMo § 376.820.⁵⁹ RSMo § 210.818. dependence contribute to the risk of domestic violence,⁶⁰ but many abuse survivors cite financial dependence as the main reason they felt compelled to stay in a violent home.⁶¹ • A teen is in an abusive home and needs an escape? Again, we must make options available to vulnerable teens that do not require them to enter a contractual sexual relationship from which they cannot legally escape. Marriage before 18 is a known driver of domestic violence,⁶² not a solution to it. Right now Missouri, by allowing child marriage, is falling behind the rest of the country and the world. Further, since Missouri does not impose a residency requirement for marriage,⁶³ it risks becoming the "destination site" for child marriage. Missouri must catch up to the rest of the nation and the world by passing SB66 and banning all marriage before age 18, no exceptions. We must act now to end the archaic, sexist, harmful practice of child marriage.⁶⁴ Robert Bornstein, The Complex Relationship Between Dependency and Domestic Violence: Converging Psychological Factors and Social Forces, *American Psychologist* (September

2006),<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16953747>.⁵¹ Nancy Salamone, Domestic Violence and Financial Dependency, *Forbes* (2 September 2010),<https://www.forbes.com/2010/09/02/women-money-domestic-violence-forbes-woman-net-worth-personal-finance.html>.⁵² Individuals in the U.S. who were married before age 18 report high rates of physical, sexual, financial or emotional abuse during their marriage as well as unwanted or unplanned pregnancies. See: Aditi Wahi, et al., The Lived Experience of Child Marriage in the United States, *Social Work Public Health* (12 February 2019),<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30747055>. Note that this is consistent with global trends. See, for example: Rachel Kidman, Child Marriage and Intimate Partner Violence: A Comparative Study of 34 Countries, *International Journal of Epidemiology* (April 2017),<https://academic.oup.com/ije/article/46/2/662/2417355>.⁵³ See: MO.gov, Marriage & Divorce, <https://www.mo.gov/home-family/marriage-divorce> (last visited 25 February 2024).



MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WITNESS APPEARANCE FORM

BILL NUMBER: HB 1200		DATE: 2/11/2025	
COMMITTEE: Children and Families			
TESTIFYING: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN SUPPORT OF <input type="checkbox"/> IN OPPOSITION TO <input type="checkbox"/> FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES			
WITNESS NAME			
INDIVIDUAL:			
WITNESS NAME: MARILYN K SMITH		PHONE NUMBER:	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:	
ADDRESS:			
CITY:		STATE:	ZIP:
EMAIL: coloradonaturalist@gmail.com	ATTENDANCE: Written	SUBMIT DATE: 2/7/2025 7:57 AM	
THE INFORMATION ON THIS FORM IS PUBLIC RECORD UNDER CHAPTER 610, RSMo.			

Testimony in Support of HB1200 Presented to the Missouri House Children and Families Committee February 11, 2025 Chair Jones, Vice Chair Peters, and Distinguished Committee Members: My name is Marilyn Smith and I am presenting my testimony as a child-marriage survivor to urge the state legislature to pass HB1200 and eliminate the loophole allowing a parent to enter a 16- or 17-year-old child into marriage. ALL children should be protected from this abuse of basic human rights, and the U.S. Department of State has declared that marriage before 18 is abuse of human rights. Children who are 16 or 17 years old need the same protection as those who are younger. Ideally, parents would make wise decisions based on what's best for their children but some parents are more concerned with their own best interest. These children need you to step in on their behalf. My husband and I were both 16 years old when our mothers decided we should marry. We were too young to live on our own so we lived with his family. My husband was immediately pulled from school to work on the farm. He worked seven days a week and was never paid. His parents were demeaning and sometimes even hostile to me. When we turned 18 and were finally old enough to get a place of our own, I watched his step-father point a loaded rifle at him and tell him he wasn't going anywhere. My husband said, "Go ahead and shoot." That's how bad it was, that a teenager would rather be shot than have to stay there. It took years for us to work through the psychological trauma we had endured from the adults who had failed us as children. Most couples look back on their wedding day with loving memories. We were told to forget ours. We look back with regret, disappointment, and anger at our mothers who recklessly tossed aside our rights to make the life-altering decision to marry after we were grown adults. No child should have to suffer at the mercy of the adults in charge, who may have little to no mercy. Passing HB1200 and ending the loophole for marriage of 16- and 17-year-old children with parental consent will end the injustice of child-marriage in Missouri. Thank you for your consideration. Sincerely, Marilyn Smith Child-marriage survivor



MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WITNESS APPEARANCE FORM

BILL NUMBER: HB 1200		DATE: 2/11/2025	
COMMITTEE: Children and Families			
TESTIFYING: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN SUPPORT OF <input type="checkbox"/> IN OPPOSITION TO <input type="checkbox"/> FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES			
WITNESS NAME			
INDIVIDUAL:			
WITNESS NAME: MARY LOU TOFT		PHONE NUMBER:	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:	
ADDRESS:			
CITY:		STATE:	ZIP:
EMAIL: revtumc@hotmail.com		ATTENDANCE: Written	SUBMIT DATE: 2/11/2025 9:38 AM
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MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WITNESS APPEARANCE FORM

BILL NUMBER: HB 1200		DATE: 2/11/2025	
COMMITTEE: Children and Families			
TESTIFYING: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN SUPPORT OF <input type="checkbox"/> IN OPPOSITION TO <input type="checkbox"/> FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES			
WITNESS NAME			
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION:			
WITNESS NAME: MATTHEW HUFFMAN		PHONE NUMBER: 666-888-1911	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME: MISSOURI COALITION AGAINST DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE		TITLE: CHIEF PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICER	
ADDRESS: 217 OSCAR DR. SUITE A			
CITY: JEFFERSON CITY		STATE: MO	ZIP: 65101
EMAIL:	ATTENDANCE:	SUBMIT DATE: 2/11/2025 12:00 AM	
THE INFORMATION ON THIS FORM IS PUBLIC RECORD UNDER CHAPTER 610, RSMo.			



MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WITNESS APPEARANCE FORM

BILL NUMBER: HB 1200		DATE: 2/11/2025	
COMMITTEE: Children and Families			
TESTIFYING: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN SUPPORT OF <input type="checkbox"/> IN OPPOSITION TO <input type="checkbox"/> FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES			
WITNESS NAME			
REGISTERED LOBBYIST:			
WITNESS NAME: MATTHEW THOMPSON		PHONE NUMBER: 660-537-5234	
REPRESENTING: MISSOURI NETWORK AGAINST CHILD ABUSE		TITLE:	
ADDRESS: 124 E HIGH STREET			
CITY: JEFFERSON CITY		STATE: MO	ZIP: 65101
EMAIL: matt@wintonpolicygroup.com	ATTENDANCE: In-Person	SUBMIT DATE: 2/11/2025 8:19 AM	
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MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WITNESS APPEARANCE FORM

BILL NUMBER: HB 1200		DATE: 2/11/2025
COMMITTEE: Children and Families		
TESTIFYING: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN SUPPORT OF <input type="checkbox"/> IN OPPOSITION TO <input type="checkbox"/> FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES		
WITNESS NAME		
INDIVIDUAL:		
WITNESS NAME: MICHAEL DREYER		PHONE NUMBER:
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:
ADDRESS:		
CITY:		STATE: ZIP:
EMAIL: mdreyer93@gmail.com	ATTENDANCE: Written	SUBMIT DATE: 2/11/2025 9:00 PM
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I urge you to support HB 1200, which raises the age of marriage to 18. Child marriage poses a grave threat to the well-being of children, with Missouri ranking 16th in child marriage per capita. The General Assembly has consistently prioritized child protection, making it imperative that we take legislative action. Shockingly, between 2000 and 2018, nearly 300,000 children under 18 were legally married in the US, disproportionately girls wed to adult men. This alarming trend exposes these girls to heightened risks of serious health issues, intimate partner violence, and mental health disorders, severely impacting their education and future earning potential. The repercussions extend to teenage mothers, for whom marriage and subsequent divorce drastically increase the likelihood of poverty. The trauma inflicted by child marriage is not limited to individuals; it imposes a significant societal cost. By raising the marriage age to 18, we uphold children's rights and protect their innocence and potential. Envision a 16-year-old girl, brimming with dreams and aspirations, burdened with the responsibilities of marriage and potential motherhood. This is not the future we should envision for our daughters. Thus, raising the marriage age is crucial for safeguarding our children and ensuring their well-being and future prospects. Child marriage, defined as marriage under 18, has been recognized internationally as a human rights violation by the United Nations. The United States Department of State similarly views forced marriage, especially involving minors, as a form of child abuse and a human rights abuse. Until 2017, child marriage was legal in all 50 states, but increased awareness and advocacy have shed light on its dangers. Child marriage essentially coerces minors into dangerous unions, exacerbated by legal and practical barriers that hinder their escape from abusive situations. Moreover, child marriage undermines statutory rape laws, as marriage licenses can shield child rapists from prosecution, endangering the child's immediate safety and future well-being. This practice disempowers women and girls, making them more vulnerable to domestic and sexual violence. I fully support legislative efforts to combat child marriage and urge you to do the same.



MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WITNESS APPEARANCE FORM

BILL NUMBER: HB 1200		DATE: 2/11/2025	
COMMITTEE: Children and Families			
TESTIFYING: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN SUPPORT OF <input type="checkbox"/> IN OPPOSITION TO <input type="checkbox"/> FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES			
WITNESS NAME			
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION:			
WITNESS NAME: MICHELE HANASH		PHONE NUMBER: 305-902-8158	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME: AHA FOUNDATION		TITLE: DIRECTOR OF POLICY	
ADDRESS: 5237 RIVER ROAD, SUITE 333			
CITY: BETHESDA		STATE: MO	ZIP: 20816
EMAIL:	ATTENDANCE:	SUBMIT DATE: 2/11/2025 12:00 AM	
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MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WITNESS APPEARANCE FORM

BILL NUMBER: HB 1200		DATE: 2/11/2025	
COMMITTEE: Children and Families			
TESTIFYING: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN SUPPORT OF <input type="checkbox"/> IN OPPOSITION TO <input type="checkbox"/> FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES			
WITNESS NAME			
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION:			
WITNESS NAME: MICKEY DOLLENS		PHONE NUMBER: 608-256-8900	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME: FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION		TITLE:	
ADDRESS: PO BOX 750			
CITY: MADISON		STATE: WI	ZIP: 53701
EMAIL: dollensm@ffrf.org	ATTENDANCE: Written	SUBMIT DATE: 2/7/2025 1:07 PM	

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February 7, 2025 Missouri State Capitol 201 W. Capitol Avenue Jefferson City, MO 65101 Testimony in Support of H.B. 1200 Presented to the Missouri House Children and Families Committee



MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WITNESS APPEARANCE FORM

BILL NUMBER: HB 1200		DATE: 2/11/2025	
COMMITTEE: Children and Families			
TESTIFYING: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN SUPPORT OF <input type="checkbox"/> IN OPPOSITION TO <input type="checkbox"/> FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES			
WITNESS NAME			
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION:			
WITNESS NAME: SHEENA EASTBURN		PHONE NUMBER: 417-572-5191	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME: UNCHAINED AT LAST		TITLE: AMBASSADOR	
ADDRESS: 6412 TIGER RD			
CITY: PIERCE CITY		STATE: MO	ZIP: 65723
EMAIL:	ATTENDANCE:	SUBMIT DATE: 2/11/2025 12:00 AM	
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MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WITNESS APPEARANCE FORM

BILL NUMBER: HB 1200		DATE: 2/11/2025
COMMITTEE: Children and Families		
TESTIFYING: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN SUPPORT OF <input type="checkbox"/> IN OPPOSITION TO <input type="checkbox"/> FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES		
WITNESS NAME		
INDIVIDUAL:		
WITNESS NAME: SHEENA EASTBURN		PHONE NUMBER:
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:
ADDRESS:		
CITY:		STATE: ZIP:
EMAIL: admin@unchainedatlast.org	ATTENDANCE: In-Person	SUBMIT DATE: 2/9/2025 1:25 PM
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I am a survivor of child marriage and I intend to share my story with the committee.



MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WITNESS APPEARANCE FORM

BILL NUMBER: HB 1200		DATE: 2/11/2025
COMMITTEE: Children and Families		
TESTIFYING: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN SUPPORT OF <input type="checkbox"/> IN OPPOSITION TO <input type="checkbox"/> FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES		
WITNESS NAME		
INDIVIDUAL:		
WITNESS NAME: SUSAN GIBSON		PHONE NUMBER:
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:
ADDRESS:		
CITY:		STATE: ZIP:
EMAIL: Onesuegibson@protonmail.com	ATTENDANCE: Written	SUBMIT DATE: 2/9/2025 12:32 PM
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This is way overdue.



MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WITNESS APPEARANCE FORM

BILL NUMBER: HB 1200		DATE: 2/11/2025
COMMITTEE: Children and Families		
TESTIFYING: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN SUPPORT OF <input type="checkbox"/> IN OPPOSITION TO <input type="checkbox"/> FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES		
WITNESS NAME		
INDIVIDUAL:		
WITNESS NAME: TALINA M MICKELSON		PHONE NUMBER:
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:
ADDRESS:		
CITY:		STATE: ZIP:
EMAIL: talina1117@yahoo.com	ATTENDANCE: Written	SUBMIT DATE: 2/9/2025 7:07 PM
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Testimony in Support of HB1200 Presented to the Missouri House Children and Families Committee



MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WITNESS APPEARANCE FORM

BILL NUMBER: HB 1200		DATE: 2/11/2025	
COMMITTEE: Children and Families			
TESTIFYING: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN SUPPORT OF <input type="checkbox"/> IN OPPOSITION TO <input type="checkbox"/> FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES			
WITNESS NAME			
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION:			
WITNESS NAME: VICTORIA ANDERSON		PHONE NUMBER:	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME: AMERICAN ATHEISTS		TITLE: STATE POLICY COUNSEL	
ADDRESS: 225 CRISTIANI STREET			
CITY: CRANFORD		STATE: NJ	ZIP: 07016
EMAIL: vanderson@atheists.org	ATTENDANCE: Written	SUBMIT DATE: 2/10/2025 1:04 PM	

THE INFORMATION ON THIS FORM IS PUBLIC RECORD UNDER CHAPTER 610, RSMo.

Dear Chairperson Jones and Members of the House Children and Families Committee: American Atheists, on behalf of its over 1,400 constituents in Missouri, thanks you for holding a hearing on HB 1200, a bill to protect young people by ending child marriage. This bill would protect children from being coerced into marriage against their will, a harmful and archaic practice that the U.S. State Department has declared a “human rights abuse.” We urge you to support this necessary 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 atheists are accepted as members of our nation’s communities and where 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. Currently, Missouri has no guardrails in place to protect children from forced marriage so long as both parties are over the age of sixteen and they obtain parental consent. This loophole invites abuse and endangers young people in Missouri. Over 8,000 children were married in the state between 2000 and 2022, including over 900 marriages in which the age difference between the child and their spouse would otherwise be considered child abuse or statutory rape. This means that Missouri’s current loopholes in state law have allowed criminal conduct against children to persist. These loopholes must be closed immediately to prevent further harm. The harm caused by child marriage cannot be overstated. Young people who marry before the age of eighteen are significantly more likely to experience disastrous health, education, and economic outcomes and have a heightened risk of experiencing violence. They have a 70- to 80-percent 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 remain single. Even if the marriage does not end in divorce, child brides are more likely to drop out of high school, less likely to attend college, and often spend their lives in poverty. Requiring that every person must be eighteen years old before getting married means that thousands of children in Missouri will be spared the heartbreaking consequences of child marriage. The fact that a family court or a minor’s parent or guardian consents to the marriage does not provide sufficient protection against entering a marriage the child may never be able to leave. In fact, one of the main reasons a child is compelled into marriage is because of parental coercion. Children experiencing teen pregnancy and financial instability, for example, are at risk of being coerced into entering a marriage they do not want by their parents. When this happens, the children face overwhelming legal and practical barriers to escaping the marriage because, as minors, they are unable to access many of the resources that are available to adults, including

domestic violence shelters or even retaining a divorce attorney. Requiring parental consent is not a safeguard against the potentially horrific outcomes associated with child marriage. On the contrary, it provides a legal mechanism for parents and guardians to irreversibly limit the rights of vulnerable children. Enacting HB 1200 would close the dangerous loophole that currently exists and ensure children throughout Missouri can no longer be placed in harm's way. We strongly urge you to advance this bill and protect young people from coerced marriage. Should you have any questions regarding American Atheists' support for HB 1200, please contact me at vanderson@atheists.org.
Sincerely, Victoria Anderson
State Policy Counsel
American Atheists



MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WITNESS APPEARANCE FORM

BILL NUMBER: HB 1200		DATE: 2/11/2025	
COMMITTEE: Children and Families			
TESTIFYING: <input type="checkbox"/> IN SUPPORT OF <input type="checkbox"/> IN OPPOSITION TO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES			
WITNESS NAME			
INDIVIDUAL:			
WITNESS NAME: MARNIE PARR		PHONE NUMBER:	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:	
ADDRESS:			
CITY:		STATE:	ZIP:
EMAIL: marnie_dennis@hotmail.com	ATTENDANCE: Written		SUBMIT DATE: 2/6/2025 7:06 PM
THE INFORMATION ON THIS FORM IS PUBLIC RECORD UNDER CHAPTER 610, RSMo.			