

November 28, 2018

To the Honorable Senator Bacon, Chair and Members of the Ohio Senate Judiciary Committee

I write on behalf of the National Association of Social Workers, Ohio Chapter. NASW is the largest membership organization of professional social workers with 150,000 members nationwide and over 4,300 members in Ohio. As a professional organization promotes, develops, and protects the practice of social work and social workers, and as social workers ourselves, we also work to enhance and protect justice and well-being for individuals, families, and communities through advocacy. We write to express our strong support for the bipartisan bill to address child marriage co-sponsored by Representatives Lanese and Rogers, HB 511.

This legislation will ensure that individuals can marry only after they are adults (age 18 or older), or are age 17 and have gone through a special hearing to screen for abuse and coercion, evaluate their best interests, and to make sure they meet the criteria for an “emancipated” minor – that they have the maturity and self-sufficiency to be independently making this decision for themselves. At that point, young people are enabled, legally and practically, to prevent or escape forced or abusive marriages. But before that moment, they are very susceptible to coercion and have limited options to advocate for themselves. By making these commonsense changes to current law, therefore, this legislation will provide critical protection for vulnerable children.

Early marriages can happen for many reasons, and in many different kinds of families. But whatever the reason, marriage before age 18 stacks the odds against a young person’s success in that marriage, and in their lives, including:

- High divorce rates – up to 80%
- More medical and mental health problems
- Lower likelihood of finishing high school and much lower likelihood of completing college
- Greater likelihood of future poverty

Given these well-documented risks and harms, we are very concerned that state records reveal Ohio has a serious child marriage problem, and that young teen girls have been married in recent years to adult men who at times have been decades older.

Current law relies heavily on parental consent to permit minors to marry. Unfortunately, the nature of our work has revealed to us that parents do not always have their children’s best interests at heart, and that they can instead be abusive, neglectful, or exploitative. Our work has also sadly shown us that rather than being a source of safety, stability and support, marriage can instead trap someone in a violent home and isolate them from help.

We cannot always or easily course-correct many of the factors that make young people vulnerable to harm. However, one clear and powerful step we can take to put them on the firmest footing to avoid these serious pitfalls is to set the legal minimum marriage age at the point where they have developmentally and legally reached a threshold of adulthood.

For all of these reasons, we believe that this important legislation will give Ohio’s children a better chance for a healthy future, and so we ask you to support HB 511.

Sincerely,



Danielle Smith
Executive Director
NASW Ohio Chapter