



AMERICAN ATHEISTS

March 25, 2021

The Honorable Rep. John Barker
Chairperson, Committee on Federal and State Affairs
Kansas House of Representatives
300 SW Tenth Avenue
Topeka, Kansas 66612-1504

Re: SUPPORT HB 2422, Concerning Raising the Minimum Age for Marriage without exception

Dear Chairperson Barker and Members of the Committee on Federal and State Affairs:

American Atheists, on behalf of its constituents in Kansas, writes in support of HB 2422, critical legislation that will end child marriage in Kansas. This bill would protect young people in Kansas from being coerced into marriage against their will, a harmful and archaic practice that happens all-too-frequently across our nation. We urge you to swiftly pass this important 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 atheism and atheists are accepted as members of our nation’s communities and where casual 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 due to the religious beliefs of their parents or guardians.

The harm caused by child marriage is daunting. It destroys the child brides’ health, education, and economic opportunities, and it increases their risk of experiencing violence. Those who marry before 18 have a 70 to 80% 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 stay single.¹ In fact, the U.S. State Department has called marriage before age 18 a “human rights abuse.”²

Currently, Kansas law allows children aged sixteen and older to marry with judicial or parental approval. Unfortunately, children can easily be forced to marry before they turn eighteen and become legal adults, because they face overwhelming legal and practical barriers if they try to leave home, enter a domestic-violence shelter, retain an attorney, or bring a legal action. Moreover, a requirement of parental “consent” hardly mitigates the danger of forced child marriage because when a child is forced

¹ Hamilton, Vivian E., “The Age of Marital Capacity: Reconsidering Civil Recognition of Adolescent Marriage” (2012). *William & Mary Law School Scholarship Repository, Faculty Publications*, 1430. Available at <http://scholarship.law.wm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2467&context=facpubs>.

² U.S. Department of State, et al., *United States Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls* (March 2016). Available at <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/254904.pdf>.

to marry, the perpetrators are almost always the parents. There will always be parental “consent” when there is parental coercion in the first place. Similarly, children in these situations are often coerced to lie to judges who might prevent such a marriage. Allowing children to marry with judicial approval is still allowing child marriage. These loopholes are not an effective procedural safeguards against the danger of forced child marriage.

Shockingly, an estimated 207,549 minors were married in the U.S. between 2000 and 2015, with 86% of those marriages being between a minor and an adult. In Kansas, approximately 2,500 children have been wed, as young as age 15.³ The vast majority of these marriages involved girls being wed to adult men.

By adopting HB 2422, Kansas would effectively eliminate this harmful practice and join other states that have taken proactive steps to end child marriage. We strongly urge you to pass HB 2422 and finally end child marriage in Kansas. If you should have any questions regarding American Atheists’ support for this bill, please contact me at 908.276.7300 x309 or by email at agill@atheists.org.

Very truly yours,



Alison Gill, Esq.
Vice President, Legal & Policy
American Atheists

³ Unchained at Last. Child Marriage – Shocking Statistics. Available at <https://www.unchainedatlast.org/child-marriage-shocking-statistics/>.