



Testimony

Reid Maki

Director of Child Labor Advocacy
National Consumers League and
Coordinator of the Child Labor Coalition
Supporting a Ban on Child Marriage
April 2, 2026

Hello, my name is Reid Maki and I represent the National Consumers League (NCL)—the Nation’s oldest consumer advocacy group, based in Washington. I am also the coordinator of the Child Labor Coalition (CLC)—38 groups committed to reducing abusive child labor here in the U.S. and abroad. NCL founded the CLC 38 years ago and continues as its sole co-chair. Our members include the National Education Association, as well as child rights, human rights, and faith-based groups. Our member list can be found here: <https://stopchildlabor.org/coalition-members>. Through our members, I write to represent millions of Americans concerned about the safety, education, and welfare of children in the US.

We support a ban on child marriage in Colorado without exemption via SB048. Between January 1, 2020, and December 31, 2023, the latest date we have data for, 139 minors married in Colorado. Between 2000 and 2023, over 5,500 minors married in Colorado.

In 2019, Colorado improved protections against child marriage, but a significant exception allowed juvenile courts to approve marriages of 16- and 17-year-olds. We believe that this opens the door for the forced marriage of vulnerable teens who may not have the maturity to explain that they are being pressured into marriage.

Exceptions are rarely worth the risk that they entail. In many cases, parental consent really means parental coercion.

Pregnancy exemptions often means that many girls will be pressured into marrying the man who committed statutory rape. Teenagers who marry are disproportionately women and often they are marrying men who are adults. As the advocacy group Unchained at Last has noted, “child marriage gives a ‘get out of jail free’ card to child rapists. Sex with a 16-year-old is considered sexual assault if the perpetrator is 10 or more years older – unless the perpetrator is married to the teen unless the perpetrator is married to the teen.”

The exploitation of children in marriage is well recognized by human rights experts around the globe. When the International Labour Organization and the anti-slavery group Walk Free announced new global estimates of the number of individuals in “modern slavery” in 2017, they defined the 15.4 million individuals who are in forced marriages as being victims of slavery; most of these victims are girls (84 percent). Six in 10 victims of forced marriage internationally are children.

In 2016, the U.S. State Department released a document called U.S. “Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls.” In it, the State Department describes marriage before age 18 "a human rights abuse that contributes to economic hardship and leads to under-investment in girls' educational and health care

needs." The State Department asserts that early marriages - which are often forced - "enable or exacerbate violence and insecurity, including domestic violence."

It's well-recognized that child marriage has significant, negative health impacts on girls. Women who marry before 18 have significantly higher risks for heart attacks, diabetes, cancer, and stroke, as well as having higher risk of mental health issues.

They are 50 percent more likely to drop out of school, and four times less likely to graduate from college. The divorce rate for girls who marry before 18 is 70-80%.

Colorado risks more than it gains by allowing these early marriages. So do the teens getting married.

A 16-year-old in America cannot vote. They cannot fight in combat. They cannot obtain a credit card. In Colorado, you must be 21 to buy cigarettes. You must be 21 to drink. Does it make sense to allow individuals under 18—children--to wed when consequences can be disastrous?

We believe that by reserving marriage for adults, the likelihood of exploitation in that marriage, whether sexual, labor-related, or financial decreases significantly. Many child brides find it difficult or impossible to leave their spouse, rent an apartment, and obtain credit. They become trapped – sometimes with their abuser.

SB048 is simple, common-sense legislation that harms no one, costs nothing, and prevents a human rights abuse. In recent years, 16 states and the District of Columbia have ended child marriage without exemption. It's time for Colorado to join them.

Reid Maki, National Consumes League, 1701 K Street, Suite 1200, Washington, DC 20006.



AMERICAN ATHEISTS

April 6, 2026

The Honorable Rep. Jenny Willford
Chair, House State, Civic, Military, & Veterans Affairs Committee
200 E. Colfax Avenue
Denver, Colorado 80203

Re: SUPPORT SB 48, Ending Child Marriage

Dear Chairperson Willford and Members of the House State, Civic, Military, & Veterans Affairs Committee:

American Atheists, on behalf of its over 1,500 constituents in Colorado, supports 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 happens all too frequently across the country. 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, Colorado allows minors to marry so long as they receive judicial approval. Appallingly, there are no guardrails in place to protect children from forced marriage so long as judicial consent is given – a dangerous loophole inviting abuse and endangering young people in Colorado. Over 5,500 children were married in Colorado between 2000 and 2023, with more than 90 marriages in

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which the age difference between the child and their spouse would otherwise be considered child abuse or statutory rape.¹ This means the current loopholes in state law have allowed criminal conduct against children in Colorado. These loopholes must be closed immediately to prevent further harm.

The harm caused by child marriage cannot be understated. 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.² 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.³ Raising the minimum age of marriage to eighteen means that hundreds of children in Colorado will be spared the heartbreaking consequences of child marriage.

The fact that a judge consents to the marriage does not provide sufficient protection against entering a marriage the child may never be able to leave. One of the main reasons a child is compelled into marriage is because of parental coercion, which cannot be adequately protected against through the state's court system. 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.⁴ 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. Simply requiring judicial or parental consent is not a

¹ *Child Marriage in Colorado*, Unchained at Last (last visited Mar. 19, 2026), <https://www.unchainedatlast.org/child-marriage-in-colorado>.

² 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>.

³ Fraidy Reiss, "Child Marriage in the United States: Prevalence and Implications" (2021). *Journal of Adolescent Health*. Available at: [https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(21\)00341-4/fulltext](https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(21)00341-4/fulltext).

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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 SB 48 would close the dangerous loopholes that currently exist and ensure children throughout Colorado 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 SB 48, please contact me at vanderson@atheists.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Victoria Anderson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Victoria" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Anderson".

Victoria Anderson
State Policy Specialist
American Atheists



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**Testimony in Support of SB26-048: Ending Child Marriage
Presented to Colorado Senate Committee on State, Military and Veterans' Affairs I
February 17, 2026**

Dear Madam Chair Willford, Vice Chair Clifford, and Distinguished Committee Members:

As a high school senior and Co-President of the Zonta PantherZ Club of Boulder High School, we are working to build a better world for women and girls. Our Zonta District 3, comprised of various clubs across Colorado, supports ending child marriage in Colorado, which is a non-partisan issue. Marriage is a serious legal contract, and we believe that it should be reserved for those who have reached the age of majority and have full access to all rights bestowed upon them at the age of majority.

We cannot imagine being married or any of our schoolmates or friends being married either. It is horrifying to think about being locked into a marriage when we cannot even vote. If your brain isn't developed enough to make decisions that change your life, how can you have the capacity to choose marriage.

In today's society, marriage is not required for couples to commit to each other. Most young people would agree marriage is not needed to have agency in a relationship.

Thank you for holding a hearing on Senate Bill26-048. Child marriage is an urgent problem in Colorado where 16- and 17-year-olds may marry with judicial approval. We urge you to vote for this bill to pass out of Committee and to support it through to passage by both chambers of the legislature.

LEGAL TRAP

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 escape if their parents are planning an unwanted wedding for them, because a minor who leaves home can be classified as a youth in crisis, an at-risk youth or a child in need of services.
- **Where would minors go even if they could escape?** We have found that domestic violence shelters across the U.S. routinely turn away unaccompanied minors, due to funding guidelines and/or liability concerns. Youth shelters are not a solution, because they are not confidential: They must notify the parents within 72 hours that the minor is there, or else notify the state Department of Children, Youth, and Families.
- 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.
- Minors are not allowed to bring a legal action in their own name. A minor aged 15 or younger cannot seek a protective order if their spouse turns abusive. Perhaps most shockingly, a minor who marries another minor is not even allowed to file independently for divorce.

Alarming Statistics in Colorado State

- 5,519 minors aged 15 to 17 were married in Washington between 2000 and 2018.

- 80% were girls wed to adult men an average of 3.93 years older.
- Between 2000 and 2014, at least 35 and possibly as many as 48 marriages occurred with a spousal age difference that would have been considered a sex crime outside of marriage.
- *All this is based on Unchained's analysis of data from the Washington Department of Health)*

Devastating Consequences of Child Marriage

- Marriage before 18, the age of adulthood, creates a legal trap and complications. Married Minors in Washington State are not emancipated. Minors before age 18 typically may not leave home, enter a domestic violence shelter, retain an attorney, seek a personal protection order, or even independently seek a marriage annulment. Additional seeking of emancipation brings only limited rights that arrive too late, after the minor has endured the trauma of forced marriage.
- Child marriage destroys girls' health, education and economic opportunities, and increases their risk of experiencing violence.
- The U.S. State Department considers child marriage, marriage before 18, child abuse and a human rights violation.
- Those who marry before 18 have a 70 to 80% chance of divorcing – and teen mothers who marry and then divorce are more likely to suffer economic deprivation and instability than teen mothers who stay single.

Simple Legislative Solution

Please pass SB26-048 to protect my peers from the dangers of child marriage and eliminate the dangerous loopholes that allow child marriage in Colorado. States and territories across the U.S., and countries around the world, are passing the same legislation to end this child abuse and human rights abuse. Learn more about the devastating consequences of child marriage here: www.unchainedatlast.org or www.stopchildmarriages.org

Sincerely,

Lily Beacom
Co-President, Zonta PantherZ Club

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Sincerely,

Lily Beacom
Co-President, Zonta PantherZ Club

Testimony in Support of SB26-048

Presented to the Colorado House State, Civic, Military, & Veterans Affairs Committee | April 6, 2026

Chair Willford, Vice Chair Clifford and Distinguished Committee Members:

Good afternoon. My name is Brandi Dredge. I live in St. Joseph, Missouri. I am an author who wrote a book about my experience as a teen mom, a child marriage, domestic violence, and sex crime survivor. I testify today alongside my fellow members of the National Coalition to End Child Marriage as a Survivor Ally.

When I was sixteen, I met a twenty-four-year-old man, who lived with some boys in my high school, and with stars in my teenage eyes, I believed he hung the moon. Four months later, I was pregnant, and a year after that, I was begging my mom to give parental consent for me and my boyfriend to get married after the attorney representing him on criminal theft charges suggested we do so before the sentencing. Since my boyfriend was a persistent and prior felon, the attorney wanted to use the marriage in the arguments for leniency on his sentence to show the judge he was a changed man, a family man with a new wife and baby. In 1997, at seventeen, I became his bride; he was twenty-five, and his prison sentence was suspended.

Over the next nine years, the statistics surrounding child marriage, such as the high likelihood of poverty, lack of further education, and enduring many forms of abuse, would ring true in my marriage in addition to the fact that I had married a child sexual predator, which was something I struggled to see even after the sheriff leading the sex crime investigation said the only difference between me and the other girls he had abused was that he married me and I had evidence of the crime, our son's DNA. In 2007, we got divorced, and he was convicted of two counts of statutory rape. One of those counts of statutory rape is for the crime he committed against me.

It has taken me a lot of years to finally see, accept, and say I am a child marriage, domestic violence, and sex crime survivor. I lost my childhood, and along the way, I lost myself. I rationalized many bad things under the guise of marriage; I couldn't see them as clearly as the sheriff, the prosecutor, and the judge could, which is why I testify today. To help others see what I couldn't.

In 2025, Missouri became the 16th state to end child marriage and prior to that much like your state they had taken steps in the right direction to change the marriage laws to protect minors and if the changes they made would have been enacted in 1997, it would have protected me and stopped my mom from making a decision that at the time she believed was the right thing for my son and me. It would have protected me from being manipulated into a marriage that wasn't for my best interest but for his, and it might have protected the 14-year-old girl he had victimized less than a year after we were married.

Hindsight is a powerful tool; it enables us to reflect on the past and make more informed decisions for ourselves and others in the future. With hindsight, I can see I was vulnerable. Manipulated. Groomed. I can see how the long-term effects of abuse have played out in my life

and my children's. I can see how old mindsets and generational trauma distort our decision-making and feed the cycles of abuse and poverty. I can see the guilt my mother carries as the one who signed for the marriage. We can all look back at that starry-eyed teen and say that it wasn't the right thing, and I am sorry no one protected you, but, hindsight isn't what the sixteen and seventeen-year-olds who maybe in similar situations today have. They only have now, the present, and you, the lawmakers, the adults in this room, who can clearly see the alarming statistics, how the risks far outweigh any benefits who have the power to do the right thing and pass this bill to end this human rights abuse and protect them from being entered into a marriage contract before they have all their legal rights of adulthood.

Thank you for your time.

Brandi (Dredge) Hasiak

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**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB26-048: ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE IN COLORADO
PRESENTED TO THE HOUSE STATE, CIVIC, MILITARY, & VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
APRIL 6, 2026**

Chair Willford, Vice Chair Clifford and Distinguished Committee Members:

AHA Foundation wishes to be recorded in strong support of SB26-048. AHA Foundation thanks Prime Sponsors Hinrichsen, Marchman, Joseph and Garcia for sponsoring this bill, and the Committee for prioritizing a hearing on this important legislation.

While the current marriage age in Colorado is 18, an alarming loophole allows juvenile courts to approve the marriage of a 16- or 17-year-old. This became law in 2019; previously, parents could marry off children of any age with judicial approval. SB26-048 eliminates this dangerous loophole, and once and for all reserves marriage, a serious legal contract, for those who have reached the legal age of majority.

Forced marriage in itself is a form of human trafficking leading to sexual exploitation and forced servitude. In addition to this, Colorado marriage-age laws incentivize and legalize the trafficking of minors under the guise of marriage. AHA Foundation was first to identify that federal law does not set a minimum age for spousal or fiancé visas;¹ instead it defers to the law in the state where the couple will reside.² Thus Colorado'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. Colorado's laws also allow and encourage individuals to legally traffic 16- and 17-year-olds from overseas to Colorado as their spouse.

This is not a small problem. In 2019, in response to AHA Foundation's FOIA request, the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, issued a report finding that 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.³

Minors, having not yet reached the age of majority, can easily be forced into marriage or trapped in an abusive marriage in which they are forced to stay. Minors being coerced into marriage may fear familial violence should they refuse to comply, or they may be physically or emotionally manipulated into an unwanted marriage. In fact, not one minor that we or our allies has worked with ever alerted the court they were being forced to marry when there was a judicial review process, out of fear of the consequences. Because they have not yet reached the legal age of majority, minors face significant legal and practical barriers if they try to leave home, enter a domestic violence shelter, retain an attorney, or file a legal action such as a divorce.

AHA Foundation has worked with victims, including minors, facing forced marriage from across the U.S., and knows full well that these barriers are grounded in reality. The individual stories we have seen are

¹ 8 U.S. Code § 1101.

² 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>.

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also supported by the data. Between 2000 and 2023, an estimated 5,519 children were married in Colorado.⁴ Around 80% were girls wed to adult men an average of 3.93 years older.⁵ Between 2000 and 2021, at least 90 and as many as 121 marriages occurred at an age and/or with a spousal age difference that would have been considered a sex crime if not for the marital exception to statutory rape.⁶ Between 2000 and 2021 Colorado had the 16th highest average rate of child marriage among the 44 U.S. states with available data.⁷

Child marriage severely limits opportunities in health, education and economic freedom. It also increases risk of domestic violence. Given these harms, one case of child marriage is one too many. If mechanisms are in place that allow for thousands of cases to slip through the cracks, the common sense solution is to enact the necessary law to close these gaps.

Colorado should not participate in child marriage or make it legally possible to force minors to marry, including to their rapists. Those at risk must be protected by a legal framework that guarantees their human rights. The solution is simple: eliminate the dangerous loophole in the marriage laws that places the children of Colorado at risk of exploitation and abuse and vote YES on SB26-048.

About AHA Foundation

AHA Foundation is a 501(c)3 nonprofit founded by women's rights activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and is the leading organization working to end honor violence that shames, hurts or kills thousands of women and girls in the U.S. each year, and puts millions more at risk. We ensure that women and girls of all races, cultures, religions, beliefs and backgrounds who are facing honor violence have a way out, and that survivors get the help they need to thrive.

Since 2010, the Foundation's programs include: 1) compiling data on these crimes, which are not currently tracked by U.S. law enforcement or government agencies, 2) publishing reports and articles and organizing conferences about the continued oppression of women and girls in the U.S., 3) outreach and education to expand and strengthen state and national legislation for the protection of women and girls, 4) training of law enforcement and service providers, and 5) connecting women and girls in crisis to appropriate services. AHA Foundation has trained over 3,400 frontline service providers on responding to cases of gender based violence, honor violence and forced marriage, and partnered with Crisis Text Line to create America's first honor violence and forced marriage helpline.

⁴ Based on marriage-license data the nonprofit Unchained At Last retrieved from the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, Center for Health & Environmental Data, Vital Statistics Program.

⁵ Id.

⁶ Based on Unchained's analysis of Colorado's statutory rape laws and marriage-license data retrieved from the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, Center for Health & Environmental Data, Vital Statistics Program.

⁷ Based on Unchained's analysis of marriage-certificate data from 44 U.S. states and Washington, D.C., and U.S. Census Bureau population data.

**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB26-048: ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE IN COLORADO
PRESENTED TO THE HOUSE STATE, CIVIC, MILITARY, & VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
APRIL 6, 2026**

Chair Willford, Vice Chair Clifford and Distinguished Committee Members:

AHA Foundation wishes to be recorded in strong support of SB26-048. AHA Foundation thanks Prime Sponsors Hinrichsen, Marchman, Joseph and Garcia for sponsoring this bill, and the Committee for prioritizing a hearing on this important legislation.

While the current marriage age in Colorado is 18, an alarming loophole allows juvenile courts to approve the marriage of a 16- or 17-year-old. This became law in 2019; previously, parents could marry off children of any age with judicial approval. SB26-048 eliminates this dangerous loophole, and once and for all reserves marriage, a serious legal contract, for those who have reached the legal age of majority.

Forced marriage in itself is a form of human trafficking leading to sexual exploitation and forced servitude. In addition to this, Colorado marriage-age laws incentivize and legalize the trafficking of minors under the guise of marriage. AHA Foundation was first to identify that federal law does not set a minimum age for spousal or fiancé visas;¹ instead it defers to the law in the state where the couple will reside.² Thus Colorado'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. Colorado's laws also allow and encourage individuals to legally traffic 16- and 17-year-olds from overseas to Colorado as their spouse.

This is not a small problem. In 2019, in response to AHA Foundation's FOIA request, the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, issued a report finding that 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.³

Minors, having not yet reached the age of majority, can easily be forced into marriage or trapped in an abusive marriage in which they are forced to stay. Minors being coerced into marriage may fear familial violence should they refuse to comply, or they may be physically or emotionally manipulated into an unwanted marriage. In fact, not one minor that we or our allies has worked with ever alerted the court they were being forced to marry when there was a judicial review process, out of fear of the consequences. Because they have not yet reached the legal age of majority, minors face significant legal and practical barriers if they try to leave home, enter a domestic violence shelter, retain an attorney, or file a legal action such as a divorce.

AHA Foundation has worked with victims, including minors, facing forced marriage from across the U.S., and knows full well that these barriers are grounded in reality. The individual stories we have seen are

¹ 8 U.S. Code § 1101.

² 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>.

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also supported by the data. Between 2000 and 2023, an estimated 5,519 children were married in Colorado.⁴ Around 80% were girls wed to adult men an average of 3.93 years older.⁵ Between 2000 and 2021, at least 90 and as many as 121 marriages occurred at an age and/or with a spousal age difference that would have been considered a sex crime if not for the marital exception to statutory rape.⁶ Between 2000 and 2021 Colorado had the 16th highest average rate of child marriage among the 44 U.S. states with available data.⁷

Child marriage severely limits opportunities in health, education and economic freedom. It also increases risk of domestic violence. Given these harms, one case of child marriage is one too many. If mechanisms are in place that allow for thousands of cases to slip through the cracks, the common sense solution is to enact the necessary law to close these gaps.

Colorado should not participate in child marriage or make it legally possible to force minors to marry, including to their rapists. Those at risk must be protected by a legal framework that guarantees their human rights. The solution is simple: eliminate the dangerous loophole in the marriage laws that places the children of Colorado at risk of exploitation and abuse and vote YES on SB26-048.

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Testimony in Support of SB26-048: Ending Child Marriage

Dear Madam Chair Willford and Vice Chair Clifford and Distinguished Committee Members:

As a high school senior, seventeen year old, and Co-President of the Zonta PantherZ Club of Boulder High School, we are working to build a better world for women and girls. Our Zonta District 3, comprised of various clubs across Colorado, supports ending child marriage in Colorado, which is a non-partisan issue. Marriage is a serious legal contract, and we believe that it should be reserved for those who have reached the age of majority and have full access to all rights bestowed upon them at the age of majority.

We cannot imagine being married or any of our schoolmates or friends being married either. It can't even vote yet. I've seen people getting married and having kids at a young age and they have personally said that they wish they would've waited. As a Latina, it somehow is normalized in my culture, but we are changing and we are growing and understanding that we need to build a better foundation to have a family which means finishing high school, going to college, having that time to finish out your teenage years. I also could not see myself getting married to my first ex boyfriend, I think that's a joke.

Thank you for holding a hearing on Senate Bill26-048. Child marriage is an urgent problem in Colorado where 16- and 17-year-olds may marry with judicial approval. We urge you to vote for this bill. I personally want you to think of yourself as when you were a 16 year old and question if you were truly ready for marriage.

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 escape if their parents are planning an unwanted wedding for them, because a minor who leaves home can be classified as a youth in crisis, an at-risk youth or a child in need of services.
- **Where would minors go even if they could escape?** We have found that domestic violence shelters across the U.S. routinely turn away unaccompanied minors, due to funding guidelines and/or liability concerns. Youth shelters are not a solution, because they are not confidential: They must notify the parents within 72 hours that the minor is there, or else notify the state Department of Children, Youth, and Families.
- 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.
- Minors are not allowed to bring a legal action in their own name. A minor aged 15 or younger cannot seek a protective order if their spouse turns abusive. Perhaps most shockingly, a minor who marries another minor is not even allowed to file independently for divorce.

Alarming Statistics in Colorado State

- 5,519 minors aged 15 to 17 were married in Washington between 2000 and 2018.
- 80% were girls wed to adult men an average of 3.93 years older.

- Between 2000 and 2014, at least 35 and possibly as many as 48 marriages occurred with a spousal age difference that would have been considered a sex crime outside of marriage.
- *All this is based on Unchained's analysis of data from the Washington Department of Health)*

Devastating Consequences of Child Marriage

- Marriage before 18, the age of adulthood, creates a legal trap and complications. Married Minors in Washington State are not emancipated. Minors before age 18 typically may not leave home, enter a domestic violence shelter, retain an attorney, seek a personal protection order, or even independently seek a marriage annulment. Additional seeking of emancipation brings only limited rights that arrive too late, after the minor has endured the trauma of forced marriage.
- Child marriage destroys girls' health, education and economic opportunities, and increases their risk of experiencing violence.
- The U.S. State Department considers child marriage, marriage before 18, child abuse and a human rights violation.
- Those who marry before 18 have a 70 to 80% chance of divorcing – and teen mothers who marry and then divorce are more likely to suffer economic deprivation and instability than teen mothers who stay single.

There is no harm resulting from this bill other than to make children wait until they reach the age of majority.

Please pass SB26-048 to protect my peers from the dangers of child marriage and eliminate the dangerous loopholes that allow child marriage in Colorado. States and territories across the U.S., and countries around the world, are passing the same legislation to end this child abuse and human rights abuse. Learn more about the devastating consequences of child marriage here: www.unchainedatlast.org or www.stopchildmarriages.org

Sincerely,

Casey Giron
Co-Presidents, Zonta PantherZ Club

Testimony in Support of SB26-048: Ending Child Marriage

Dear Madam Chair Willford and Vice Chair Clifford and Distinguished Committee Members:

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We cannot imagine being married or any of our schoolmates or friends being married either. It can't even vote yet. I've seen people getting married and having kids at a young age and they have personally said that they wish they would've waited. As a Latina, it somehow is normalized in my culture, but we are changing and we are growing and understanding that we need to build a better foundation to have a family which means finishing high school, going to college, having that time to finish out your teenage years. I also could not see myself getting married to my first ex boyfriend, I think that's a joke.

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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 escape if their parents are planning an unwanted wedding for them, because a minor who leaves home can be classified as a youth in crisis, an at-risk youth or a child in need of services.
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Sincerely,

Casey Giron
Co-Presidents, Zonta PantherZ Club

In May 1998, I was 17 years old, being walked down the aisle to a wedding I did not plan—to a man I never wanted to marry.

This was the culture of the high-control group I was born and raised in. My entire generation was subjected to arranged, forced marriages, and if you tried to advocate for yourself, you were punished.

Three nights before my wedding, I sat down with my parents and told them I did not want to be married—to the man who had been chosen for me. He turned 18 just three days after we wed.

My parents didn't know what to do, so they called the church leaders—who were also my grandparents. My father was instructed to spank me, because expressing my feelings was considered rebellion. I was spanked, and three days later, I was married.

It never should have happened. There was a pattern of me being silenced, controlled, and emotionally abused.

At 17, I was considered old to be married. I know many in our community who were married at 15 and 16.

We were children. We had no resources, nowhere to turn, and no real understanding of how wrong this was. We weren't even considered adults yet. Please pass legislation that protects children from forced and underaged marriages.

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Testimony in Support of SB048

Presented to the Colorado House State, Civic, Military, & Veterans Affairs Committee | April 6, 2026

Chair Willford, Vice Chair Clifford and Distinguished Committee Members:

The Service Women's Action Network (SWAN), a not-for-profit organization advocating for servicewomen, past, present, and future. We urge you to close the loophole that allows a military exception to the marriage age in Alaska. We urge you to end all marriage before 18, without an exception for servicemembers or any other exceptions. We do not believe that marriage is acceptable under the age of 18 for any reason, including service to our nation. We understand that often the purpose of marriage for servicemembers under the age of 18 is to ensure that if a service member were to lose their life overseas, their spouse would receive full benefits for their service to our nation.

Under the Survivor Benefit Plan, service members can designate a significant other to receive benefits if the service member passes away; the Plan does not require the individuals to be married. Additionally, servicemember' military benefits extend to their children, regardless of the servicemembers' marital status so long as the child is properly recognized as a dependent. Death gratuity is also offered for service members who die while on active duty or while serving in certain reserve statuses. The death gratuity is the same regardless of the cause of death.

The longstanding purpose of the death gratuity has been to provide an immediate cash payment to assist survivors of deceased members of the Armed forces to meet their financial needs during the period immediately following a member's death and before other survivor benefits, if any, become available.

SWAN believes that using marriage for servicemembers leaving to war as a motive to keep marriage before 18 legal in this country is a misinformed stance. Servicemembers who choose to serve our country can select their beneficiaries; therefore, the requirement for marriage is needless.

A secondary consideration is the military health and housing benefits afforded to spouses. Military health and housing benefits through a spouse are not a solution for underage marriage. A child's economic dependency should not justify marriage before 18 years old. Underage marriage can create a long-term level of dependence that increases a spouse's chance of experiencing domestic violence.

Thank you for your consideration. Please do not hesitate to reach out to our organization for additional information. We appreciate your continued support of our nation's service members and veterans.



**Testimony in Support of SB26-048
Presented to the Colorado House State, Civic, Military, & Veterans Affairs Committee | April 6, 2026**

Chair Willford, Vice Chair Clifford and Distinguished Committee Members:

Unchained At Last is a survivor-led nonprofit working to end forced and child marriage in Colorado and across the United States through direct services and systems change. We at Unchained, and our many allies in the Colorado Coalition to End Child Marriage that we convene, urge the state legislature to pass SB048 and eliminate the archaic, harmful practice of child marriage.

Child marriage is a serious problem in Colorado. The marriage age is 18,¹ but an alarming legal loophole allows juvenile courts to approve the marriage of a 16- or 17-year-old.² This became law in 2019; previously, parents could marry off children of *any* age with judicial approval.³ The 2019 law change was a good first step, but more steps are needed.

Continued Dangers in the Current Law

- A requirement for judicial approval does not prevent parents from forcing their own child to marry, even with the safeguards added in 2019.⁴ Judicial review puts the onus on terrified teens to figure out how to explain that they are being forced to wed, without facing dire repercussions at home.
- Child marriage continues to happen at an alarming rate under the 2019 law (not surprising, since 98% of the minors who married here before 2019 were aged 16 or 17⁵). Just between January 1, 2020, and December 31, 2023, the latest date for which data are available, 139 minors were entered into marriage in Colorado.⁶
- Child marriage gives a “get out of jail free” card to child rapists. Sex with a 16-year-old is considered sexual assault if the perpetrator is 10 or more years older⁷ – unless the perpetrator is married to the teen.⁸
- Teens are automatically emancipated upon marriage,⁹ which terminates their parents’ financial obligation to them.¹⁰ This can force the teen to become financially dependent on their spouse – a risk factor for domestic violence.¹¹ It also incentivizes forced child marriage, so a parent can get out of a child support obligation or child custody battle.
- Child marriage encourages the legal trafficking of minors under the guise of marriage.¹²

Devastating Consequences of Child Marriage

- Marriage before 18, the age of adulthood,¹³ creates a nightmarish legal trap. Minors before age 18 cannot easily leave home,¹⁴ enter a shelter,¹⁵ retain an attorney¹⁶ or independently bring a legal action.¹⁷ (Marriage emancipates minors, but that brings only limited rights.¹⁸ Further, those limited rights arrive too late, only *after* the minor has endured the trauma of forced marriage.)
- Child marriage destroys American girls’ health, education and economic opportunities, and increases their risk of experiencing violence.¹⁹ The U.S. State Department calls marriage before age 18 a “human rights abuse.”²⁰
- Those who marry before age 18 have a 70% to 80% chance of divorcing,²¹ which brings additional instability and hardship.

Alarming Statistics

- At least 5,519 minors were wed in Colorado between 2000 and 2023.²²
- Some 80% were girls wed to adult men an average of 3.93 years older.²³
- Between 2000 and 2021, at least 90 and as many as 121 marriages occurred at an age and/or with a spousal age difference that would have been considered a sex crime if not for the marital exception to statutory rape.²⁴
- In fact, Colorado’s average rate of child marriage between 2000 and 2021 was the 16th highest among the 44 U.S. states with available data. During that period, Colorado’s average rate of child marriage was 1.27 per 1,000 minors aged 15 to 17.²⁵

Simple Legislative Solution

- SB048 would keep the marriage age at 18 but eliminate the loophole that allows marriage before that age. It is simple, commonsense legislation that harms no one, costs nothing and ends a human rights abuse.
- States and territories across the U.S. and countries around the world are making the marriage age 18, no exceptions. Colorado is falling behind and risks becoming a destination site for child marriage.²⁶ More information is at www.unchainedatlast.org.

¹ Colorado Revised Statutes (C.R.S.) § 14-2-106(1)(a)(I).

² C.R.S. § 14-2-108.

³ HB19-1316 was signed into law on 31 May 2019 and went into effect on 2 August 2019. See: <https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/hb19-1316>.

⁴ C.R.S. § 14-2-108(2). The safeguards include: (1) The court must appoint a guardian ad litem for the underage party, and the guardian ad litem must file a report advising whether the marriage is in the underage party's "best interests." However, the U.S. State Department calls marriage before age 18 a "human rights abuse" (See: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/254904.pdf>). How can a human rights abuse ever be in a minor's best interest? (2) The court must "consider" the following: (a) The wishes of the underage party. However, this puts the onus on traumatized teens to find a safe way to communicate to the court that they are being forced to marry; (b) The view of the parents or legal guardians. However, the fact that parents or guardians "consent" to a marriage in no way means the marriage is consensual; (c) The ability of the underage party to assume the responsibilities of marriage. However, the statute does not specify what the "responsibilities of marriage" are; (d) The circumstances surrounding the marriage. However, when parents are pushing a marriage on their teenage child, and the teenager is too scared to disclose that information, the court has no way to know the actual circumstances surrounding the marriage; (e) The ability of the underage party to manage their financial and other affairs. However, requiring a court to "consider" this is a low bar that does not ensure only self-sufficient minors are entered into marriage. (3) The court must determine that the marriage would serve the minor's "best interests" (and pregnancy is not enough to establish this). However, again, how can a human rights abuse ever be in a minor's best interest?

⁵ Based on marriage-license data Unchained retrieved from the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, Center for Health & Environmental Data, Vital Statistics Program.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ C.R.S. § 18-3-402(1)(e).

⁸ *Id.*: The perpetrator commits sexual assault only if they are "not the spouse of the victim."

⁹ *In re Marriage of Fetters*, 584 P.2d 104, 106 (Colo. Ct. App. 1978).

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ 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>.

¹² Federal law (8 U.S. Code § 1101) does not set a minimum age for spousal or fiancé visas; instead it defers to the law in the state where the couple will reside (see: U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *How the U.S. Immigration System Encourages Child Marriages* (11 January 2019), https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-Y4_G74_9-PURL-gpo115058/pdf/GOVPUB-Y4_G74_9-PURL-gpo115058.pdf). Thus Colorado'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. Colorado's laws also allow and encourage individuals to legally traffic 16- and 17-year-olds from overseas to Colorado as their spouse.

¹³ C.R.S. § 13-22-101: The age of adulthood is 18. (Note that Colorado statute refers to anyone under age 21 as a "minor," per C.R.S. § 2-4-401(6). However, that designation does not supersede other statutes, such as § 13-22-101. In this memo, "minor" refers to persons under age 18.)

¹⁴ C.R.S. § 26-5.7-104: Law enforcement may take a minor into custody if the minor's parent reports them as a runaway.

¹⁵ We have found that domestic violence shelters across the U.S. routinely turn away unaccompanied minors, due to funding guidelines and/or liability concerns. Youth shelters are not a solution, because they are not confidential; they must notify the parent within 24 hours (See: C.R.S. § 26-5.7-106(2)). Also, youth shelter stays are limited to 21 days, and youth shelters must strive to reunite the youth with their family within that time (See: C.R.S. § 26-5.7-105(2)).

¹⁶ C.R.S. § 13-22-101(1)(a): Persons must be age 18 or older to enter into any legal contractual obligation and be legally bound thereby. See also: *Doenges-Long Motors v. Gillen*, 328 P.2d 1077, 1080 (Colo. 1958). See also: *Nicholas v. People*, 973 P.2d 1213, 1219 (Colo. 1999), citing *Jones v. Dressel*, 623 P.2d 370, 373 (Colo. 1981).

¹⁷ C.R.S. § 13-22-101(1)(c): Persons under age 18 may bring a legal action only through a guardian ad litem or other third party.

¹⁸ C.R.S. § 14-2-109.3 lists the specific, limited rights a minor receives upon marriage.

¹⁹ Fraidy Reiss, *Why Can 12-Year-Olds Still Get Married in the United States*, *Washington Post* (10 February 2017), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/02/10/why-does-the-united-states-still-let-12-year-old-girls-get-married>.

²⁰ 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>.

²¹ 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>.

²² Based on marriage-license data Unchained retrieved from the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, Center for Health & Environmental Data, Vital Statistics Program.

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ Based on Unchained's analysis of Colorado's statutory rape laws and marriage-license data Unchained retrieved from the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, Center for Health & Environmental Data, Vital Statistics Program.

²⁵ Based on Unchained's analysis of marriage-certificate data from 44 U.S. states and Washington, D.C., and U.S. Census Bureau population data. Note that the calculations were based on the state that issued each marriage license (not the state of residence) and the issuing state's population.

²⁶ C.R.S. §§ 14-2-105; 14-2-106; 14-2-107: Colorado does not impose a residency requirement for marriage.

Testimony in Support of SB048
Presented to the Colorado House State, Civic, Military, & Veterans Affairs Committee
April 6, 2026

Chair Willford, Vice Chair Clifford and Distinguished Committee Members:

We are a bipartisan group of state legislators who have partnered with the nonprofit group Unchained At Last to end child marriage in our states, territories and district. We respectfully urge you, our fellow lawmakers, to do the same. End this archaic, sexist practice that destroys girls' lives – even if you get the pushback we got at first.

Marriage before age 18 creates a nightmarish legal trap, even for the most mature 17-year-olds. Minors face overwhelming legal and practical barriers if they try to leave home, enter a confidential shelter, retain an attorney or bring a legal action.

Further, marriage before 18 is recognized as a human rights abuse.¹ It destroys nearly every aspect of American girls' lives, including their health, education economic opportunities² and even their physical safety.³

You probably will get pushback when you try to pass the simple, commonsense legislation we introduced in our states, which eliminated the dangerous loopholes that allowed marriage before age 18. Do not compromise. Do not replace one loophole with another; insist on a marriage age of 18, without exceptions. There is no room for negotiation when you are ending a human rights abuse.

You will hear, as we did at first, from legislators and others whose grandmothers married at 14. Remind them that the world has changed since grandma was a kid.

You will hear arguments about young love. Respond by asking what harm comes to a young couple if they wait a matter of months to marry. Minors must wait until 18 to enter almost any other contract, regardless of how passionately they feel about it.

But what if a girl is pregnant, some will ask you. Let them know we would be harming, not helping, if we married off pregnant girls. Teen mothers in the U.S. who marry are more likely to suffer economic deprivation and instability than teen mothers who stay single.⁴

A teen mother who wants to co-parent with the father of the baby can easily do so outside of marriage. He can simply establish paternity, and his insurance and other benefits would cover the baby. We no longer have illegitimacy laws that punish babies born “out of wedlock.”

Do not be swayed by the religious argument. We do not know of any religion that requires child marriage; actually, every major religion has supported legislation to end child marriage. Besides,

¹ 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>.

² Fraidy Reiss, *Child Marriage in the United States: Prevalence and Implications*, *Journal of Adolescent Health* (December 2021), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1054139X21003414>.

³ 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>.

⁴ Vivian Hamilton, *The Age of Marital Capacity: Reconsidering Recognition of Adolescent Marriage*, William & Mary Law School Scholarship Repository (2012), <http://scholarship.law.wm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2467&context=facpubs>.

the U.S. Supreme Court has upheld laws that incidentally forbid an act required by religion, if the laws do not target religious practice.⁵

No, ending child marriage does not impact reproductive rights. The U.S. Supreme Court has established that states should treat minors' abortion differently from minors' marriage, because the former is time sensitive while the latter is not.⁶

And no, do not agree to a loophole that allows emancipated minors to be subjected to a human rights abuse. Emancipation is for teens who cannot be reunited with their parents; it gives them some rights of adulthood so they can fend for themselves. Teens do not need marriage to fend for themselves.

Teens do not need marriage, period. If they are in an abusive home or cannot get health insurance from their parents, they deserve resources that do not require them to enter a contractual sexual relationship.

Under United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5.3, the U.S. joined 192 other countries in promising to end child marriage by year 2030.⁷ We have achieved that goal in 16 states, two territories and one district so far, despite initial resistance from our colleagues.

Now we call on you, our fellow lawmakers, to join us. Every child in the U.S. is relying on us to keep our promise to the world and end all marriage before 18. No exceptions. No compromises.

Delaware Rep. Kim Williams
Delaware Fmr Sen. Anthony Delcollo
New Jersey Sen. Nellie Pou
New Jersey Asm. Nancy Munoz
Pennsylvania Rep. Perry Warren
Pennsylvania Rep. Jesse Topper
Pennsylvania Fmr Sen. John Sabatina
Minnesota Sen. Sandra Pappas
Minnesota Fmr Rep. Kaohly Her
Rhode Island Rep. Julie Casimiro
Rhode Island Sen. John Burke
New York Sen. Julia Salazar
New York Asm. Phil Ramos
Massachusetts Fmr Rep. Kay Khan
Massachusetts Fmr Sen. Harriette Chandler
Vermont Rep. Carol Ode
Connecticut Rep. Jillian Gilchrest
Michigan Rep. Kara Hope
Michigan Sen. Sarah Anthony
Washington Rep. Monica Stonier
Washington Sen. Derek Stanford
Virginia Del. Karen Keys-Gamarra
New Hampshire Sen. Debra Altschiller

New Hampshire Rep. Cassandra Levesque
Maine Rep. Laura Supica
Oregon Sen. Janeen Sollman
Oregon Sen. David Brock Smith
DC Councilmember Brooke Pinto
Missouri Sen. Tracy McCreery
Missouri Rep. Renee Reuter
US Virgin Islands Fmr Sen. Javan James

⁵ 494 U.S. 872, *Employment Division, Department of Human Resources of Oregon v. Smith* (No. 88-1213).

⁶ 443 U.S. 622 (1979), *Bellotti v. Baird* (No. 78-329).

⁷ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Sustainable Development* (2015), <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5>.

Testimony in Support of SB26-048
Presented to the Colorado House State, Civic, Military, & Veterans Affairs Committee | April 6, 2026

Chair Willford, Vice Chair Clifford and Distinguished Committee Members:

Please enact this simple piece of legislation that will protect girls under age 18 from being forced to marry. As a society, we acknowledge that persons under the age of eighteen are not ready to exercise the legal rights of adults. Allowing a minor to be married puts that person in an untenable legal situation where they are emancipated but lacking full adult rights. There is no good reason to allow children to be married.

Thank you,

Morgan Wolf

1617 Meachum Way, Erie, CO 80516

Child marriage is a serious problem in Colorado. The marriage age is 18,¹ but an alarming legal loophole allows juvenile courts to approve the marriage of a 16- or 17-year-old.² This became law in 2019; previously, parents could marry off children of *any* age with judicial approval.³ The 2019 law change was a good first step, but more steps are needed.

Simple Legislative Solution

- SB048 would keep the marriage age at 18 but eliminate the loophole that allows marriage before that age. It is simple, commonsense legislation that harms no one, costs nothing and ends a human rights abuse.
- States and territories across the U.S. and countries around the world are making the marriage age 18, no exceptions. Colorado is falling behind and risks becoming a destination site for child marriage.²⁶ More information is at www.unchainedatlast.org.

Continued Dangers in the Current Law

- A requirement for judicial approval does not prevent parents from forcing their own child to marry, even with the safeguards added in 2019.⁴ Judicial review puts the onus on terrified teens to figure out how to explain that they are being forced to wed, without facing dire repercussions at home.
- Child marriage continues to happen at an alarming rate under the 2019 law (not surprising, since 98% of the minors who married here before 2019 were aged 16 or 17⁵). Just between January 1, 2020, and December 31, 2023, the latest date for which data are available, 139 minors were entered into marriage in Colorado.⁶
- Child marriage gives a “get out of jail free” card to child rapists. Sex with a 16-year-old is considered sexual assault if the perpetrator is 10 or more years older⁷ – unless the perpetrator is married to the teen.⁸
- Teens are automatically emancipated upon marriage,⁹ which terminates their parents’ financial obligation to them.¹⁰ This can force the teen to become financially dependent on their spouse – a risk factor for domestic violence.¹¹ It also incentivizes forced child marriage, so a parent can get out of a child support obligation or child custody battle. • Child marriage encourages the legal trafficking of minors under the guise of marriage.¹²

Devastating Consequences of Child Marriage

- Marriage before 18, the age of adulthood,¹³ creates a nightmarish legal trap. Minors before age 18 cannot easily leave home,¹⁴ enter a shelter,¹⁵ retain an attorney¹⁶ or independently bring a legal action.¹⁷ (Marriage emancipates minors, but that brings only limited rights.¹⁸ Further, those limited rights arrive too late, only *after* the minor has endured the trauma of forced marriage.)
- Child marriage destroys American girls’ health, education and economic opportunities, and increases their risk of experiencing violence.¹⁹ The U.S. State Department calls marriage before age 18 a “human rights abuse.”²⁰ • Those who marry before age 18 have a 70% to 80% chance of divorcing,²¹ which brings additional instability and hardship.

Alarming Statistics

- At least 5,519 minors were wed in Colorado between 2000 and 2023.²²
- Some 80% were girls wed to adult men an average of 3.93 years older.²³

• Between 2000 and 2021, at least 90 and as many as 121 marriages occurred at an age and/or with a spousal age difference that would have been considered a sex crime if not for the marital exception to statutory rape.²⁴ • In fact, Colorado's average rate of child marriage between 2000 and 2021 was the 16th highest among the 44 U.S. states with available data. During that period, Colorado's average rate of child marriage was 1.27 per 1,000 minors aged 15 to 17.²⁵

¹ Colorado Revised Statutes (C.R.S.) § 14-2-106(1)(a)(I).

² C.R.S. § 14-2-108.

³ HB19-1316 was signed into law on 31 May 2019 and went into effect on 2 August 2019. See: <https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/hb19-1316>.

⁴ C.R.S. § 14-2-108(2). The safeguards include: (1) The court must appoint a guardian ad litem for the underage party, and the guardian ad litem must file a report advising whether the marriage is in the underage party's "best interests." However, the U.S. State Department calls marriage before age 18 a "human rights abuse" (See: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/254904.pdf>). How can a human rights abuse ever be in a minor's best interest? (2) The court must "consider" the following: (a) The wishes of the underage party. However, this puts the onus on traumatized teens to find a safe way to communicate to the court that they are being forced to marry; (b) The view of the parents or legal guardians. However, the fact that parents or guardians "consent" to a marriage in no way means the marriage is consensual; (c) The ability of the underage party to assume the responsibilities of marriage. However, the statute does not specify what the "responsibilities of marriage" are; (d) The circumstances surrounding the marriage. However, when parents are pushing a marriage on their teenage child, and the teenager is too scared to disclose that information, the court has no way to know the actual circumstances surrounding the marriage; (e) The ability of the underage party to manage their financial and other affairs. However, requiring a court to "consider" this is a low bar that does not ensure only self-sufficient minors are entered into marriage. (3) The court must determine that the marriage would serve the minor's "best interests" (and pregnancy is not enough to establish this). However, again, how can a human rights abuse ever be in a minor's best interest?

⁵ Based on marriage-license data Unchained retrieved from the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, Center for Health & Environmental Data, Vital Statistics Program.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ C.R.S. § 18-3-402(1)(e).

⁸ *Id.*: The perpetrator commits sexual assault only if they are "not the spouse of the victim."

⁹ *In re Marriage of Fetters*, 584 P.2d 104, 106 (Colo. Ct. App. 1978).

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ 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>. ¹² Federal law (8 U.S. Code § 1101) does not set a minimum age for spousal or fiancé visas; instead it defers to the law in the state where the couple will reside (see: U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *How the U.S. Immigration System Encourages Child Marriages* (11 January 2019), https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-Y4_G74_9-PURL_gpo115058/pdf/GOVPUB-Y4_G74_9-PURL_gpo115058.pdf). Thus Colorado'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. Colorado's laws also allow and encourage individuals to legally traffic 16- and 17-year-olds from overseas to Colorado as their spouse.

¹³ C.R.S. § 13-22-101: The age of adulthood is 18. (Note that Colorado statute refers to anyone under age 21 as a "minor," per C.R.S. § 2-4-401(6). However, that designation does not supersede other statutes, such as § 13-22-101. In this memo, "minor" refers to persons under age 18.)

¹⁴ C.R.S. § 26-5.7-104: Law enforcement may take a minor into custody if the minor's parent reports them as a runaway. ¹⁵ We have found that domestic violence shelters across the U.S. routinely turn away unaccompanied minors, due to funding guidelines and/or liability concerns. Youth shelters are not a solution, because they are not confidential; they must notify the parent within 24 hours (See: C.R.S. § 26-5.7-106(2)). Also, youth shelter stays are limited to 21 days, and youth shelters must strive to reunite the youth with their family within that time (See: C.R.S. § 26-5.7-105(2)).

¹⁶ C.R.S. § 13-22-101(1)(a): Persons must be age 18 or older to enter into any legal contractual obligation and be legally bound thereby. See also: *Doenges-Long Motors v. Gillen*, 328 P.2d 1077, 1080 (Colo. 1958). See also: *Nicholas v. People*, 973 P.2d 1213, 1219 (Colo. 1999), citing *Jones v. Dressel*, 623 P.2d 370, 373 (Colo. 1981).

¹⁷ C.R.S. § 13-22-101(1)(c): Persons under age 18 may bring a legal action only through a guardian ad litem or other third party.

¹⁸ C.R.S. § 14-2-109.3 lists the specific, limited rights a minor receives upon marriage.

¹⁹ Fraidy Reiss, *Why Can 12-Year-Olds Still Get Married in the United States*, *Washington Post* (10 February 2017), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/02/10/why-does-the-united-states-still-let-12-year-old-girls-get-married>.

²⁰ 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>.

²¹ 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>.

²² Based on marriage-license data Unchained retrieved from the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, Center for Health & Environmental Data, Vital Statistics Program.

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ Based on Unchained's analysis of Colorado's statutory rape laws and marriage-license data Unchained retrieved from the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, Center for Health & Environmental Data, Vital Statistics Program. ²⁵ Based on Unchained's analysis of marriage-certificate data from 44 U.S. states and Washington, D.C., and U.S. Census Bureau population data. Note that the calculations were based on the state that issued each marriage license (not the state of residence) and the issuing state's population.

²⁶ C.R.S. §§ 14-2-105; 14-2-106; 14-2-107: Colorado does not impose a residency requirement for marriage.

House State, Civic, Military, & Veterans Affairs

04/06/2026

SB26-048 Remove Exception to Marry with Judicial Approval

Typed Text of Testimony Submitted

Name, Position, Representing	Typed Text of Testimony
Ranelle Randles For themselves	<p>Data shows child marriage creates negative and long lasting impacts on girls”Physically, emotionally and economically. Colorado needs to take a stand to protect child brides.</p> <p>Unlike adults, minors lack full legal capacity, which results in severe consequences for those who are married as children. Specifically, married minors often face barriers such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inability to file for divorce or obtain protective orders independently against abusive spouses or parents as minors generally cannot initiate legal action.• Inability to hire attorneys since contracts with minors, including retainer agreements, are typically considered voidable under state law.• Limited access to domestic violence shelters, which routinely turn away unaccompanied minors.• Limited access to youth shelters, which are usually not confidential and cannot house youth for extended periods.• Difficulty accessing Child Protective Services (CPS), which may decline to serve married minors, considering them outside their jurisdiction.• Restricted support from advocates, who may face criminal charges for assisting minors in leaving home without parental consent.• Limited ability to leave home, as married minors may be considered runaways under state law. <p>The current legal system treats married minors as both children and adults, leading to troubling gaps in protections intended to shield children from violence and perpetuating power imbalances inherent in child marriages. Child marriage destroys 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</p>

	<p>as well as unwanted or unplanned pregnancies. And 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. Please end this harmful practice and go on record as a protector of children.</p>
<p>Tammi McMahan For themselves</p>	<p>Good afternoon committee members,</p> <p>What a beautiful day it is, to be able to have the greatest American opportunity, to come before you and testify on behalf of my own experience, in hopes to end child marriage.</p> <p>My name is Tammi, and I am a survivor of an American child marriage. I was married a month after I turned 15, despite there being a police report for aggravated sexual assault of a child filed against the individual involved. The trauma of that experience has impacted my life in profound ways, and I have spent years dealing with its emotional, psychological, and practical consequences.</p> <p>Child marriage is not a harmless tradition it is a violation of a child’s rights, safety, and development. My experience is evidence that minors cannot give informed consent to marriage, and laws allowing it put vulnerable children at risk of abuse, coercion, and lifelong hardship.</p> <p>I urge you to take action to ensure that no child in Colorado is subjected to what I endured. The state must make it illegal for anyone under 18 to marry, without exceptions. Children deserve the chance to grow, learn, and make their own decisions as adults, free from coercion and exploitation.</p> <p>Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be grateful for any opportunity to speak with you further about this issue and share my horrific story in more detail to support legislative efforts to end child marriage in Colorado. All minors deserve to have equal protection.</p> <p>Sincerely,</p> <p>Tammi McMahan</p> <p>tammiscase@gmail.com</p> <p>254-289-9716</p>



Dear Members of the Committee,

I am writing in support of SB26-48. My name is Jenelle Goodrich, and I am the Founder and Executive Director of From Silenced to Saved. My organization serves as a co-response advocacy and case management agency for victims of human trafficking in Colorado, with a primary focus on cases involving minors.

In recent years, we have seen a concerning rise in child marriage cases, something we had not encountered at this frequency in the past. While I understand there are many nuances surrounding this issue, I want to bring forward the realities we are witnessing on the ground.

Most recently, we assisted a young woman who had been brought to the United States from Afghanistan. She was sent by her family and effectively transferred into a forced marriage with an adult male. For five years, she was denied access to education and employment and became a mother during that time. As a young adult, she taught herself English by watching television, which ultimately exposed her to the idea that her circumstances were neither normal nor acceptable.

When she spoke up, she was physically assaulted by her mother-in-law while others in the household observed. Despite these conditions, she bravely developed a plan to escape. With support from advocates and law enforcement, she fled the home with her young son and came to our office to report years of abuse and provide evidence to trusted Law enforcement who work these specific crimes. I am grateful to share that she is now safe and rebuilding her life. However, her story is not an isolated incident.

From our agency's perspective, another critical concern is the number of adult men who target vulnerable young girls online from difficult home environments. In some cases, parents are persuaded or coerced into permitting these marriages, allowing ongoing abuse of minors under the protection of legal loopholes. With the passage of SB26-15 in Senate Judiciary, we successfully removed the marriage exception in certain areas of the law. However, we remain deeply concerned about any remaining provisions that continue to permit or enable child marriage.

There are clear and necessary restrictions on what minors are allowed to do, and these protections exist for good reason. Marriage should be no exception. My professional background includes work involving cult dynamics, where forced relationships and early marriages are commonly used to groom individuals and create trauma bonds. While this may seem extreme, I assure you that these patterns are present in Colorado today.

I ask you to prioritize the safety and well-being of children by supporting SB26-48. Colorado should be a place where we unequivocally protect minors over adults, and ensure they are not subjected to exploitation under any circumstance.

Thank you,
Jenelle Goodrich
Founder & Executive Director
From Silenced to Saved (FSTS) - jgoodrich@fsts.org

Jenelle Goodrich



AMERICAN ATHEISTS

April 6, 2026

The Honorable Rep. Jenny Willford
Chair of House State, Civic, Military & Veterans Affairs Committee
Colorado State Capitol - Room HCR LSB-A
200 East Colfax Avenue
Denver, Colorado 80203-1784

Re: SUPPORT SB26-048, Remove Exception to Marry with Judicial Approval

Dear Chairperson Willford and Members of the House State, Civic, Military & Veterans Affairs Committee:

American Atheists, on behalf of its over 1,500 constituents in Colorado, supports 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 happens all too frequently across the country. **We urge you to vote YES on SB26-048.**

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, Colorado allows children as young as sixteen to marry with judicial approval. Appallingly, there are no guardrails in place to protect children from forced marriage so long as approval is given – a dangerous loophole inviting abuse and endangering young people in Colorado. Over 5,500 children were married in Colorado between 2000 and 2023, with more than 90 marriages in which the age difference between the child and their spouse would otherwise be considered child abuse or statutory rape.¹ This means the current loopholes in state law have allowed criminal conduct against children in Colorado. These loopholes must be closed immediately to prevent further harm.

The harm caused by child marriage cannot be understated. 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

¹ *Child Marriage in Colorado*. Unchained at Last. (2025). Available at: <https://www.unchainedatlast.org/child-marriage-in-colorado/>

AMERICAN ATHEISTS

225 Cristiani Street • Cranford, NJ 07016-3214
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Testimony of American Atheists SUPPORT SB26-048

Page 2 of 2

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.² 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.³ Raising the minimum age of marriage to eighteen means that hundreds of children in Colorado will be spared the heartbreaking consequences of child marriage.

The fact that 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.⁴ 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. Simply requiring judicial or 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 SB26-048 would close the dangerous loopholes that currently exist and ensure children throughout Colorado can no longer be placed in harm's way. We strongly urge you to advance this bill and protect young people from coerced marriage.

We urge you to vote YES on SB26-048.

Thank you for allowing me to testify. I am available for questions.

<https://www.unicefusa.org/stories/fight-end-child-marriage-california>

Sheryl Kallivrousis

sherylkall@comcast.net

American Atheists volunteer

² 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>.

³ Fraidy Reiss, "Child Marriage in the United States: Prevalence and Implications" (2021). *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

Available at: [https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(21\)00341-4/fulltext](https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(21)00341-4/fulltext).

⁴ Paige Cassidy and Tyehimba Turner, "The Fight Continues to End Child Marriage in the U.S." (2021). UNICEF USA. Available at: <https://www.unicefusa.org/stories/fight-continues-end-child-marriage-us>.



ENOUGH ABUSE®

Testimony in Support of SB26-048 to End Child Marriage in CO

**Presented to the Colorado House State, Civic, Military, & Veterans Affairs Committee
April 6, 2026**

Chair Willford, Vice Chair Clifford and Distinguished Committee Members:

ENOUGH ABUSE® is a 65-year-old child advocacy nonprofit, working to prevent child sexual abuse through training, public awareness, and policy advocacy. We urge you to support SB26-048 and end the archaic practice of child marriage in Colorado.

- This bill would stand up for girls by removing the exception for judicial approval, requiring that anyone be 18 to marry.
- States across the U.S. and countries around the world are doing the same.
- The U.S. State Department calls all marriage before age 18, including at age 17, a human rights abuse. It risks nearly every aspect of a girl's life, including her health, education, economic opportunities and physical safety. Some 70%- 80% of marriage before age 18 ends in divorce, which brings additional hardship and instability.
- Marriage before age 18, including at age 17, creates a difficult legal trap. Minors cannot easily leave home, enter a domestic violence shelter, retain an attorney or bring a legal action in their own name – until the day they turn 18.
- A requirement for judicial approval does not prevent parents from forcing their own child to marry, even though the 2019 law raised the age to do so to 16.
- Judicial review puts the onus on terrified teens to figure out how to explain that they are being forced to wed, without facing dire repercussions at home.
- Child marriage gives a “get out of jail free” card to child rapists. Sex with a 16-year-old is considered sexual assault if the perpetrator is 10 or more years older in Colorado – unless the perpetrator is married to the teen. 16-year-olds cannot legally vote, serve in the military, or buy alcohol or cigarettes, so why should they be considered legally able to consent to a legally binding marriage?

ENOUGH ABUSE®

112 Water Street, Suite 502 ~ Boston, MA 02109
617-742-8555 ~ www.enoughabuse.org

- According to Unchained at Last, “child marriage continues to happen at an alarming rate under the 2019 law (not surprising, since 98% of the minors who married here before 2019 were aged 16 or 17). Just between January 1, 2020, and December 31, 2023, the latest date for which data are available, 139 minors were entered into marriage in Colorado.”
- Teens are automatically emancipated upon marriage, which terminates their parents’ financial obligation to them. This can force the teen to become financially dependent on their spouse – a risk factor for domestic violence. It also incentivizes forced child marriage, so a parent can get out of a child support obligation or child custody battle.
- Child marriage encourages the legal trafficking of minors under the guise of marriage.

For all of these reasons, we urge you to support **SB26-048** to remove the exception to marry with judicial approval. SB048 would keep the marriage age at 18 but eliminate the loophole that allows marriage before that age. It is simple, commonsense legislation that harms no one, costs nothing and ends a human rights abuse. States and territories across the U.S. and countries around the world are making the marriage age 18, no exceptions. Colorado is falling behind and risks becoming a destination site for child marriage.



Jetta Bernier, Executive Director
ENOUGH ABUSE®

ENOUGH ABUSE®

112 Water Street, Suite 502 ~ Boston, MA 02109
617-742-8555 ~ www.enoughabuse.org

Testimony in Support of SB26-048

Presented to the Colorado House State, Civic, Military, & Veterans Affairs Committee |
April 6, 2026

Chair Willford, Vice Chair Clifford, and Distinguished Committee Members:

Hi, I'm Stephanie Lowry, and I'm a survivor of child marriage.

My story is an example of a systemic failure that prioritizes legal loopholes over a child's safety.

A month after my sixteenth birthday, I was forced into marriage with a 19-year-old man in Summit County.

I had just lost my father to brain cancer, he was 42. I was a grieving teenager. After my father's death, my mother, who was focused on finding a new husband, began viewing my two siblings and me as obstacles. Marriage became her solution—a way to remove a burden. Within months of my father's passing, she arranged for my older sister to be married at 19. My younger brother and I were then sent to live with them. When I became pregnant shortly before my 16th birthday, my mother saw a chance to marry me off as well.

I was something to be handled, not protected. I didn't feel like I had a choice. I felt like a problem that needed to be solved. I stood in an Ohio courthouse at 16. The moment the judge signed the license, the state of Ohio and my mother washed their hands of me. I became a wife, and my 19-year-old husband became my legal guardian, responsible for my safety, my decisions, and my financial support.

Without family support or childcare, I could not attend school, and my age made securing a job difficult. Becoming a wife, on top of the hardship of being a teen mother, only added to my vulnerability. A pregnant minor needs her parents' support to finish school and navigate motherhood, not a marriage certificate that fast-tracks her into potential violence and poverty.

And when the abuse began in my child marriage, I tried to get help, but the statistics were against me. I couldn't easily access domestic violence shelters; most won't take a minor. The options given were to put my son and me in foster care, but we would be separated.

17, too young to be a mother, and too young to be running from a husband. Most of the support programs available required you to be eighteen. Child marriage does not lead to adult rights. Instead, the signing of the marriage certificate instantly transfers the responsibility for financial support, education, and medical care from the parents to the husband. For me, marriage simply meant gaining a new legal guardian, who was also my abuser, without any legal route to escape until I reached the age of 18.

The laws allow for child marriage in Ohio, but the system provides no support after. We allow child marriage because we buy into the illusion of giving a minor "choice." Yet, we don't give sixteen-year-olds the choice to vote or buy alcohol, recognizing their vulnerability. Why is a marriage contract—a document with lifelong consequences—issued with less restrictions than buying a pack of cigarettes?

When I turned 18, I was finally old enough to file for my own divorce. But the consequences didn't end with a court date. Child marriage shaped every aspect of my life, including the

poverty I had to fight through and the sense of safety I had to rebuild from scratch. No child should have to be as resilient as I was just to reach adulthood.

I made it. I built a life. I am now a partner to a loving husband, and I am a mother who unconditionally loves and protects her children. I spent years in therapy to understand what happened to me. I also had to support my children through the trauma these circumstances created for them too. I worked hard to become whole.

I am sharing my story because Colorado must draw a clear line. We must **end the exceptions**: The law must be 18 years old, no exceptions. We must not allow children to be burdens so easily transferred.

Thank you.

04/02/26

Testimony in favor of SB26-048

By: Julie Trone, M.Ed. Affiliated with Zonta International; Zonta USA Caucus; Zonta District 12, and the Zonta Club of Fort Collins holding leadership positions at each level. For Collins, Colorado

Written testimony in support of Senate Bill 26-0487

My name is Julie Trone, and I am a resident of Fort Collins, Colorado. I am writing this testimony today in strong support of Senate Bill 26-048, which would close the remaining loophole in Colorado law that allows children as young as 16 to marry with a judge's approval. I urge you to pass SB26-048 without hesitation.

The current law fails to protect children even with a judge's or parent's approval.

Colorado took an important first step in 21019 prohibiting marriage for anyone under the age of 16. But stopping at age 16, despite the justification from a specific community about body autonomy, becomes a door open to trap teenagers in marriages that are not equipped, physically/emotionally/economically, to consent to, escape from, or survive without lasting harm. State data shows that at least 4,763 marriage license applications submitted in Colorado between 2000 and 2025 involved a child. This is not a small number and it amounts to 190 children each year. Over the last 25 years this adds up to thousands of children whose futures were altered before they were old enough to vote, sign a contract, or go on her/his own to a domestic violence shelter for help. Often, when a child marries and becomes a domestic violence victim there is no where to go except enter into the unhoused community. Many girl child brides with children who are victims and have no housing options due to financial restraints, lack of job, lack of high school diploma, and lack of affordable child care live on the streets endangering themselves and their children.

Judicial approval is not adequate protection.

Some argue that requiring a judge's approval safeguards minors from exploitation. In most states and under federal law sex with a child would be considered rape. A judicial approval undermines statutory rape laws and felony rape laws in Colorado allowing the rapist to have exemption except for non-consensual acts however the latter is difficult to prove. Rape survivors have testified in front of the Colorado legislation that judicial oversight did not protect them. A judge spending a brief hearing cannot possibly assess the full scope of coercion, grooming, or family pressure that may lie beneath a marriage request.

Child marriage enables abuse- and silences survivors.

A marriage license can be used to silence survivors of grooming and abuse. This includes grooming by the parents, guardians, relatives, neighbors, and unsuspecting friends. When an abuser has legal authority to access the said child through marriage there are fewer protections for the child. Colorado should not be in the business of issuing licenses that protect predators. In fact, a recent bill, SB26-097, aimed to distinguish between voluntary sex work and human trafficking, keeping penalties in place for coercion, trafficking, and acts involving minors. This is yet another reason to protect minors by passing SB26-048. Enacting clarity, 18+ no exceptions for marriage, is exactly what this law needs. Exceptions — no matter how well-intentioned — become loopholes. They invite pressure, coercion, and manipulation.

This is about protecting childhood, not restricting freedom.

Marriage, divorce, domestic violence, parenting at a young age all have lifelong impacts. If a child bears a child their child will have significantly less equal opportunities as well. More girls are child brides than boys. The statistics show that it is more likely for these girls to end up in poverty, homelessness, experience abuse, and, if they bear children, these offspring are more likely to experience incarceration according to research on child marriages in the United States. Reaching adulthood offers a child the chance to finish high school, enter college or trade school if desired and contribute as an adult to their local economy. This is protective and provides a better chance for success.

I urge you to vote **yes** on SB26-048 and send a clear message that Colorado will not allow its children to be married off before they have a chance to become an adult.

Testimony in Support of SB26-048

Presented to the Colorado House State, Civic, Military, & Veterans Affairs Committee | April 6, 2026

Chair Willford, Vice Chair Clifford and Distinguished Committee Members:

As a former resident of Colorado, and as a child-marriage survivor, I am pleased that you are considering this bill. Colorado is an exceptional state and approval of SB26-048 will significantly improve the lives of its most vulnerable population, minors who need its strong protection for their safety and well-being. Please guard their future with diligence, because the future of Colorado's children is the future of Colorado.

My husband and I were both 16 years old when our mothers made the decision for us to marry. They were each in their early 50's, had been married and divorced, had adult children, and were grandmothers. They had to have known how difficult marriage would be for us, but it was convenient for them at the time and that was their priority. Neither of our fathers were consulted. We were driven out of state and married by a justice of the peace. He didn't ask us if we wanted to get married, but even if he had we would have said yes because we didn't feel like we could say no. Years later my husband confessed to me that his step-father had "badgered" him until he agreed to propose to me. You can imagine how devastating that was for me to learn.

Of course, we were too young to live on our own so we lived with my husband's family. The first thing they did was pull him out of school to work on the farm. His step-father promised to pay him a weekly wage, but he never did. We did not have free access to a vehicle or a phone. We wanted to leave but had no where to go. When we finally turned 18 and were legally adults, we found a way out. As we were preparing to leave, his step-father pointed a loaded rifle at him and told him he wasn't going anywhere. My husband told him to go ahead and shoot. That's how bad it was, that a teenager would rather be shot than to have to stay there. We did leave, but the trauma has followed us all our lives.

My husband got his GED and joined the Air Force, an option that is no longer available today as a high school diploma is a requirement for today's military enlistment. We eventually came to Colorado when he was stationed at NORAD. We loved Colorado so much that we made it our home for almost 30 years. Our grandchildren were born in Colorado Springs and still live there. The oldest is seventeen and is experiencing high school, friends, cross country, varsity track, and is a state bowling champion. *That's* how a teenager's life should be, with all the best opportunities that Colorado has to offer.

Please pass SB26-048 and remove the exception to marry with judicial approval. Marriage is a life-altering commitment for which under-age minors are not prepared. We have a tendency to romanticize marriage, but it requires a tremendous amount of work and determination and even then, even in the best of situations, many do not make it. Children need all the help they can get to succeed in life, not set up to fail from the start with the tremendous burden of stress, trauma, and often the tragic abuse that comes with a child marriage. Not in the 21st century, not in the United States, and definitely not in the great state of Colorado.

Sincerely,
Marilyn Smith
Johnson City, TN

Testimony in Support of SB26-048

Presented to the Colorado House State, Civic, Military, & Veterans Affairs Committee | April 6, 2026

Chair Willford, Vice Chair Clifford and Distinguished Committee Members:

I was married at age 17, and it was before I could vote or attend college or other adult privileges. My spouse did not treat me well with my parents out of the picture. I want to prevent other girls from the same fate. I was able to obtain a divorce at age 24 but it took me many years to be able to find a path out of my marriage due to being so young.

Although I was married in Nevada, the same thing that happened to me is currently legal in Colorado. Please let girls in Colorado wait until they are 18 and eliminate any loopholes that allow them to get married younger than 18, 17 is still too young. Girls at that age deserve to attend senior prom, spend time with friends, and graduate high school.

Sincerely,
Adrianna Gould

Testimony in Support of SB26-048

Presented to the Colorado House State, Civic, Military, & Veterans Affairs Committee

April 6, 2026

Chair Willford, Vice Chair Clifford, and Distinguished Committee Members:

Thank you for allowing me to present my story to this committee today on this extremely important issue.

I was a child bride. A 15-year-old ninth-grader who entered into a marriage with a 35-year-old man in Texas. I had spent my whole childhood living in a dysfunctional family, with a brutal and alcoholic father, and an abused and traumatized mother. My parents finally divorced, and nine months later, my mom, my three younger siblings, and I were tossed out into the street along with our meager possessions. Evicted due to past due rent and unpaid promises on our little two-bedroom house. My mom sent my younger siblings off to live with relatives, but she kept me. I worked as a waitress, and I made money, which she needed. But I was living in a state of panic, trying to survive, desperately distraught over losing my siblings, and worried about what would happen next. We were living in a small one-room cabin on a week-to-week basis with her boyfriend, who didn't work.

A few weeks later, a 35-year-old friend of my mom's offered me a ride home from my waitressing job. He knew what we were going through, and he said, "**I will take care of you, Dana, but we must make it legal.**" He drove me home, told my mom, and she agreed. That was the start of my life as a married child.

My whole life, I had been raised in a house of fear, shame, and silence. A house where my dad beat my mom black and blue on a weekly basis during his alcoholic rages. As a little girl, I learned to be silent, to stay out of harm's way: a blueprint of grooming. So, marrying me off to a man twenty years my senior was easy. My mom was married off at sixteen herself.

He drove my mom and me to the Choctaw County Courthouse in Oklahoma, where he lied about my age. He wrote "16" on the marriage license, hoping to avoid an inquiry by a judge, and Mom signed away my consent. The ladies in the County Clerk's office didn't do the math to verify my age with my birthdate on the birth certificate, and they stamped "APPROVED" on my file. No judge required.

I was married three days later, in an empty courtroom, in front of a blind Justice of the Peace and two county clerks: the required witnesses to the event. No flowers, no wedding dress, no family. Just a scared 15-year-old girl wondering what she was doing here.

That was the first day of my married life. That night, we attended a party in our honor at a local dance hall, where I was surrounded by drunk adults, slapping Billy on the back, congratulating him for "robbing the cradle". Asking if they could dance with me, hoping to see what it felt like to grope a 15-year-old on the dance floor.

After that party, we drove out in the country for the after-party. A small trailer house packed with people smoking pot, sharing pills of every color, like M&M candies. Everyone was drunk and wasted. I found a corner of a couch and curled into myself, hoping no one would see me. That night was my initiation as a child bride, a life that in an instant flipped from a fifteen-year-old ninth-grade teenager to a child bride, a young girl with no consent, and no rights at the mercy of a man she didn't really know, thrust into a life of sex, drugs, and alcohol.

These are the back stories that your county clerks and your judges do not hear when they are approving a child marriage. There are no blanks on the marriage license that will be filled in with these stories. When that marriage license is approved, you are sentencing that child bride to a life of sexual servitude and abuse, or worse. She will have **no right to object, to ask for help, to file for divorce, or to file rape or assault charges**. She is still a minor! And even if you change the age to 17, you are giving that adult **the power of one year to impose his will over her**, to groom her into silence. She will probably be pregnant by eighteen and will then be further burdened with the responsibility of a child, when she is but a child herself.

The age of consent must be 18 to protect these innocent young girls. Please, don't put another child through what I lived through for the nine years of my child bride marriage. These

“policies without protection” must end. Please prioritize our children and protect them by raising the Colorado Age of Consent to 18, with no exceptions. I beg of you.

Thank you,

Dana VonAllmen

A Child-Bride Survivor

To whom it concerns:

My name is Catrina Dheel. I was a child bride. At the age of 15 I was married off to the young man who impregnated me. I got pregnant at 14, birthed a son at 15 & 4 months later given to this man who was 4 years older than myself. We met when I was only 13! I have survived a lifetime of trauma. It is absolutely insane that one could believe any human is capable of making logical choices or decisions at the age of 15?! I'm 52 years old now. I use to believe the way my life went was all my fault. The truth is, none of it was EVER MY FAULT. It was the fault of my parents for giving me away because of a mistake I made. It was the fault of the abusive man who coerced me into believing his lies. It was the fault of a system that allows such an act to happen. How is this still ok? If we had all day I could share why it is still ok. Our country does not value women! We are treated as pawns in a man's chess game. My first experience with a sexual act was 8! By an older family member. Yet, it seems pedophiles, disgusting, vile humans can get away with violating and abusing little girls and boys. Marry them. Treat them however, and the people who have the ability to change some of these insane laws, sit back and do nothing. As if they can't see the damage that's been caused by the mistreatment of people. Being a child wife does something to a girl. My innocence was stolen. My mental health struggled. I thought I was worthless. I was beaten, raped, hospitalized, thrown from moving cars, kicked down flights of stairs, punched in the face—the head.... I could go on and

on. The prices I've paid are overly high! As I stated, a lifetime of trauma. Because even after I escaped it didn't stop. I suffered in silence for so long. Ashamed. I believed what people said. But, it was never a "me" issue. It was a judicial, moral breakdown of humanity. Stop allowing grown men to marry little, innocent girls! Stop taking our value and worth to turn into a monetary gain. Stop allowing such mistreatment of the female gender period! Without us no man would exist! Without us no babies would be birthed. I pray that someone on this panel believes in the same God I do. I pray a change is made. Don't keep allowing generations to continue in such toxic, cycles of abuse. Nothing changes if nothing ever changes....

Thank you—Catrina Dheel

Written Testimony in Support of CO SB26-048 (Child Marriage Ban)

To the Members of the House State, Civic, Military, & Veterans Affairs Committee,

My name is Kay Powell, and I am writing in strong support of SB26-048 to fully ban child marriage in Colorado.

This bill is not just about policy. It is about protection, clarity, and accountability.

Child marriage is often framed as a cultural, parental, or situational decision — but at its core, it removes a young person’s ability to fully consent, develop safely, and access the protections they are legally entitled to as minors. We cannot say we are protecting children while also allowing exceptions that legally bind them to adult responsibilities and relationships.

From a developmental and mental health perspective, adolescence is a critical period for identity formation, emotional regulation, and cognitive growth. Introducing legal marriage during this stage — often alongside power imbalances, financial dependence, and limited exit options — creates conditions that can increase vulnerability to coercion, isolation, and long-term harm.

This is especially important when we consider how systems already fail young people. Many minors do not have the language, resources, or support to advocate for themselves, particularly in situations where family, community, or authority figures are involved. When the law allows child marriage, it reinforces those power imbalances instead of protecting against them.

There is no circumstance where a child should be placed in a legally binding contract that can alter the trajectory of their life before they have reached full legal adulthood. Exceptions do not create protection — they create loopholes.

SB26-048 is a necessary step toward aligning our laws with what we already know: children deserve safety, autonomy, and the opportunity to reach adulthood without being placed in adult legal relationships.

I urge you to support this bill and move it forward without exceptions.

Respectfully,

Kay Powell