

Date: January 25, 2022

Subject: Support for HB 83 to End Child Marriage in Maryland

Dear Madams/Sirs:

My name is Karen Jarvis, and I am a resident of Howard County. I am submitting the following written testimony in support of 2022 Maryland House Bill 83 - The Emancipation of a Minor and Authorization to Marry.

What is the problem?

Under current Maryland law, lax provisions fail to recognize, among other concerns, that a pregnancy can result from rape and that parental consent can really be parental coercion. Clerks can issue marriage licenses to 15-year-olds if there is *both* a pregnancy and parental consent, and to 16- and 17-year-olds if there is *either* a pregnancy or parental consent.

Legislative reforms would ensure that individuals can marry only when they reach “majority” (age 18, unless 17 and court-emancipated prior to marriage), when they have all the rights of an adult. This ensures those who do marry are legally empowered, and practically better positioned, either to give their full and free consent or to prevent or escape an unwanted or abusive marriage.

How does Maryland compare to other states?

Maryland House Bill 83 still falls short of the forward movement to limiting marriage to legal adults. Only six states – Delaware, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island – have set the minimum age at 18 years old and eliminated all exceptions. Survivor testimony and state marriage license records also confirm that children are being brought into Maryland from neighboring states to be married. Maryland must strengthen its laws against child marriage, or the state will continue to be a regional destination for the exploitation of children.

Why resistance to increasing the marrying age?

We must consider that the resistance to marriage only for legal adults in Maryland is to fall prey to American patriarchal beliefs and practices within society. Our male-dominated culture helps determine, for example, how a girl should behave, how she should dress, who she should see, who to marry, and what to do with her body. Oftentimes families closely guard girls’ sexuality and virginity and aim to protect family honor if a girl has relationships or becomes pregnant outside of marriage.

In closing, I urge you to strongly consider the provisions put forth in House Bill 83 - The Emancipation of a Minor and Authorization to Marry.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Karen D. Jarvis

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