



AMERICAN ATHEISTS

March 5, 2019

The Honorable Assemb. Steve Yeager
Chair, Assembly Committee on the Judiciary
Legislative Building, Room 3138
401 S. Carson St.
Carson City, Nevada 89701

Re: SUPPORT for AB 139, Ending Child Marriage; requiring a person to be at least 18 years of age to marry

Dear Chairperson Yeager and Members of the Committee on the Judiciary:

American Atheists, on behalf of its constituents in Nevada, thanks you for considering AB 139, a bill to end child marriage in Nevada. This bill would protect young people in Nevada from being coerced into marriage against their will, a harmful and archaic practice that happens all-too-frequently across our nation. We urge you to swiftly pass this important legislation.

American Atheists is a national civil rights organization that works to achieve religious equality for all Americans by protecting what Thomas Jefferson called the “wall of separation” between government and religion created by the First Amendment. We strive to create an environment where atheism and atheists are accepted as members of our nation’s communities and where casual bigotry against our community is seen as abhorrent and unacceptable. We promote understanding of atheists through education, outreach, and community-building and work to end the stigma associated with being an atheist in America. American Atheists believes that children should never be coerced into marriage due to the religious beliefs of their parents or guardians.

Current Nevada law permits young people under the age of 18 to marry under certain conditions. Young people ages 16 or 17 may marry with permission provided by a parent or guardian. Children younger than 16 may be granted a marriage certificate with permission provided by a parent or guardian as well as court approval.¹ These loopholes invite abuse and endanger young people in Nevada.

The harm caused by child marriage is daunting. It destroys the child brides’ health, education and economic opportunities, and increases their risk of experiencing violence. Those who marry before 18 have a 70 to 80% chance of getting divorced—and teen mothers who marry and then divorce are much more likely to end up in poverty than teen mothers who stay single.² An estimated 207,549

¹ NRS 122.025.

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>.

minors were married in the U.S. between 2000 and 2015, with 86% of those marriages being between a minor and an adult.³

The U.S. State Department has called marriage before age 18 a “human rights abuse.”⁴ However, children can easily be forced to marry before they turn 18 and become legal adults, because they face overwhelming legal and practical barriers if they try to leave home, enter a domestic-violence shelter, retain an attorney, or bring a legal action. Moreover, a requirement of parental “consent” hardly mitigates the danger of forced child marriage because when a child is forced to marry, the perpetrators are almost always the parents. There will always be parental “consent” when there is parental coercion in the first place. Therefore, Nevada law currently contains no effective procedural safeguards against the danger of forced child marriage.

By adopting AB 139, Nevada would effectively eliminate this loophole and join states such as New Jersey and Delaware which have taken proactive steps to end child marriage. We urge you to pass this important bill to protect children in Nevada. If you should have any questions regarding American Atheists’ support for AB 139, please contact me at 908.276.7300 x309 or by email at agill@atheists.org.

Very truly yours,



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

cc: All Members of the Nevada Assembly Committee on the Judiciary

³ Tsui A, Nolan S, and Amico C. Child Marriage in America: By the Numbers. (July 6, 2017). Available at <http://apps.frontline.org/child-marriage-by-the-numbers/>.

⁴ U.S. Department of State, et al. United States Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls (March 2016). Available at <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/254904.pdf>.