



Alaska State Legislature

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House Bill 310 Sponsor Statement

An act relating to the minimum age of eligibility for marriage

The United States has denounced child marriage in other countries as a “human rights abuse that contributes to economic hardship,” yet in Alaska, the statutes do not reflect our values. House Bill 310 seeks to protect Alaskan minors who lack many of the legal rights extended to adults from experiencing this form of abuse by raising the minimum age of marriage from 14 to 18. It includes an exception for emancipated minors.

Under current law, Alaskan minors cannot vote, serve on a jury, purchase a fire arm, open a checking account on their own, file a domestic violence protective order on their own, or work without the consent of their parents; yet they are old enough to be married with parental approval or a court ruling in the case of those under 16. This places a child in a particularly vulnerable situation where they could be coerced into marrying an abuser. If the relationship is abusive, leaving their spouse may be extremely difficult. House Bill 310 would protect minors by requiring them to have the same rights as adults before getting married.

Marriage before the age of 18 correlates with poor health and interrupted or discontinued education. Women who marry before the age of 18 are more likely to experience a range of medical problems including psychiatric disorders like clinical depression and are more likely to seek health services. Women who marry in their teens tend to have children at a younger age and tend to have more children, making education and work opportunities difficult to pursue. Women who marry before the age of 19 are 50% more likely to drop out of high school and four times less likely to graduate from college.

Limited education makes it incredibly difficult for these women to become financially independent in the event of domestic violence or divorce. 70-80% of marriages involving children under 18 end in divorce while nation-wide, only 40-50% of marriages end in divorce. Having forgone education and work opportunities, these individuals may be left to choose between poverty and staying with, in the best case, someone they no longer want to be with, and in the worst case, an abuser.

Because of challenges like mental health issues, limited education, and limited work experience; women who were married as minors are 31% more likely to live in poverty when older. These hardships are felt not just by the individuals, but also the state, which may end up footing the bill for various health and food services on behalf of the individual and any children they may have. With House Bill 310, Alaska joins the ranks of numerous other states that are re-examining marriage laws in an effort to put an end to a human rights abuse that affects not just individuals but society as a whole.