

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING COMMITTEE

April 5, 2022

1:32 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator David Wilson, Chair
Senator Shelley Hughes, Vice Chair
Senator Mia Costello
Senator Lora Reinbold

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Tom Begich

OTHER LEGISLATORS PRESENT

Representative Elvi Gray-Jackson

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

CS FOR HOUSE BILL NO. 62(JUD) am
"An Act relating to the Legislative Ethics Act; relating to solemnization of marriage; and relating to consent to marriage."

- HEARD AND HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 62

SHORT TITLE: MARRIAGE WITNESSES

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) CLAMAN

02/18/21	(H)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/15/21
02/18/21	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/18/21	(H)	STA, JUD
02/25/21	(H)	STA AT 3:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
02/25/21	(H)	-- Testimony <Invitation Only> --
03/04/21	(H)	STA AT 3:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
03/04/21	(H)	Heard & Held
03/04/21	(H)	MINUTE(STA)
03/09/21	(H)	STA AT 3:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
03/09/21	(H)	Heard & Held
03/09/21	(H)	MINUTE(STA)
03/11/21	(H)	STA AT 3:00 PM GRUENBERG 120

03/11/21 (H) Moved HB 62 Out of Committee
 03/11/21 (H) MINUTE(STA)
 03/12/21 (H) STA RPT 4DP 2DNP 1AM
 03/12/21 (H) DP: CLAMAN, STORY, TARR, KREISS-TOMKINS
 03/12/21 (H) DNP: EASTMAN, VANCE
 03/12/21 (H) AM: KAUFMAN
 03/19/21 (H) JUD AT 1:30 PM GRUENBERG 120
 03/19/21 (H) <Bill Hearing Canceled>
 03/24/21 (H) JUD AT 1:30 PM GRUENBERG 120
 03/24/21 (H) Heard & Held
 03/24/21 (H) MINUTE(JUD)
 03/29/21 (H) JUD AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
 03/29/21 (H) <Bill Hearing Canceled>
 03/31/21 (H) JUD AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
 03/31/21 (H) Moved CSHB 62(JUD) Out of Committee
 03/31/21 (H) MINUTE(JUD)
 04/05/21 (H) JUD RPT CS(JUD) NEW TITLE 4DP 3DNP
 04/05/21 (H) DP: DRUMMOND, KREISS-TOMKINS, SNYDER,
 CLAMAN
 04/05/21 (H) DNP: EASTMAN, VANCE, KURKA
 03/09/22 (H) SUSTAINED RULING OF CHAIR Y21 N14 E4 A1
 03/11/22 (H) TECHNICAL SESSION 3/11 - ON 3/14
 CALENDAR
 03/16/22 (H) TRANSMITTED TO (S)
 03/16/22 (H) VERSION: CSHB 62(JUD) AM
 03/18/22 (S) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
 03/18/22 (S) HSS, JUD
 04/05/22 (S) HSS AT 1:30 PM BUTROVICH 205

WITNESS REGISTER

REPRESENTATIVE MATT CLAMAN
 Alaska State Legislature
 Juneau, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Sponsor of HB 62.

BREANNA KAKARUK, Staff
 Representative Matt Claman
 Alaska State Legislature
 Juneau, Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Presented the sectional analysis for HB 62,
 version B.A.

JOE CONNELLY, Owner
 Chugach Peaks Photography
 Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation on HB 62.

DAWN TYREE, Founding Member
National Coalition to End Child Marriage in the United States
Kodiak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation on HB 62.

RIMI NASHASHIBI, Founder and President
Global Hope 365
Tustin, California

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified by invitation on HB 62.

FRAIDY REISS, Founder and Executive Director
Unchained At Last
Westfield, New Jersey

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 62.

REVERAND CIAN MULHERN, Senior Pastor
Celtic Ministries
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 62, but urged the committee to increase the age of marriage to 18.

ALEX GOYETTE, Senior Public Policy Associate
Tahirih Justice Center
Falls Church, Virginia

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 62, but urged the committee to increase the age of marriage to 18.

GENEVIEVE MEYER, Co-Founder
Resiliency Foundation
Fort Wayne, Indiana

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 62, but urged the committee to increase the age of marriage to 18.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[1:32:59 PM](#)

CHAIR DAVID WILSON called the Senate Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:32 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Costello, Reinbold, and Chair Wilson. Senator Hughes arrived thereafter.

HB 62-MARRIAGE WITNESSES

[1:33:23 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON announced the consideration of CS FOR HOUSE BILL NO. 62(JUD) am "An Act relating to the Legislative Ethics Act; relating to solemnization of marriage; and relating to consent to marriage."

[CSHB 62(JUD)am was before the committee.]

CHAIR WILSON stated that the intention today is to hear the introduction, sectional analysis, and invited and public testimony.

[CSHB 62(JUD) AM was before the committee.]

[1:33:58 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MATT CLAMAN, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, sponsor of HB 62, introduced the bill paraphrasing the following sponsor statement:

At present, during the solemnization of marriage, couples must assent to the marriage in the presence of each other, the person solemnizing the marriage, and at least two additional witnesses. Afterward, all parties must sign the marriage certificates. House Bill 62 would eliminate the requirements of any additional witnesses at the marriage solemnization and the signatures of these witnesses on marriage certificates to help support Alaska's destination wedding industry while preserving the integrity of marriage. HB 62 also adds a requirement that a person verify that the parties intend to marry each other. Thus, both the person solemnizing and the person verifying sign the marriage certificate and provide contact information.

Alaska is one of 20 states that require two wedding witnesses—the upper limit of wedding witness requirements nationwide. Twenty-three states and the district of Columbia do not require wedding witnesses at all. Wedding witnesses played a more critical role in past centuries when record keeping was less automated. Witnesses could be contacted to verify the wedding had taken place if records were damaged or missing. Today, however, the role of a wedding witness is ceremonial. In Alaska, while the person solemnizing the marriage must meet certain criteria, no form of witness verification is required—just a signature. HB 62 would allow Alaska to compete with states like

Hawaii and Florida, which require no wedding witnesses and lead the nation in destination weddings.

Destination weddings are a significant and growing business in Alaska. Non-resident weddings (where both parties are non-residents) already comprise approximately 10% of marriages in Alaska. But the two witness requirement makes Alaska a less attractive location for many who travel from farther away or who do not want the financial burden of a larger wedding. Couples who come to the state without their own witnesses are tasked with finding strangers to witness their wedding. The burden of supplying these witnesses often falls to those to work in Alaska's wedding industry who ask friends and family to witness the weddings of their out-of-town clients. The additional witness requirement can also place an increased financial burden on the couple. For example, for a remote location wedding, such as a glacier, the couple must pay extra seating costs to transport the witnesses.

At present, destination weddings bring in an estimated \$1 million in revenue to Alaska in the form of approximately 500 destination weddings a year. This revenue figure doesn't even account for the fact that more than 90% of the out-of-state couples who come to Alaska to get married stay for days and weeks to explore our great state. The resulting benefit to Alaska's tourism industry is substantial.

REPRESENTATIVE CLAMAN stated that a House floor amendment also changed Alaska law relating to child marriage. It addresses the growing concern about the relationship between child marriage and human and sex trafficking. He emphasized that reducing or eliminating child marriage in Alaska is an important step in improving public safety, and it better reflects community values.

[1:38:14 PM](#)

BREANNA KAKARUK, Staff, Representative Matt Claman, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, presented the sectional analysis for HB 62:

House Bill 62
Sectional Analysis – Version B.A

Section 1

AS 24.60.030(a). Prohibited conduct and conflicts of interest. Amends the Legislative Ethics Act to allow a legislator to accept travel and hospitality for solemnizing a marriage.

Section 2

AS 25.05.301. Form of solemnization. Eliminates the requirement of two witnesses at a marriage solemnization ceremony and adds a person who "verifies" the marriage by (1) communicating with both parties to confirm their intent to marry; and (2) signing the marriage certificate. The person verifying the marriage is not required to witness the ceremony.

Section 3

AS 25.05.321. Certificates. Eliminates the requirement for two witnesses to sign the marriage certificate and adds a person who "verifies" the marriage by signing the marriage certificate.

Section 4

AS 25.05.321. Certificates. Specifies that the person solemnizing the marriage and the person verifying the marriage must put their contact information on the certificate forms.

Section 5

AS 25.05.361. Unlawful solemnization of marriage. Deletes language to conform with changes made in section 2 of the bill.

Section 6

Repeals AS 25.05.041(a)(3) and (a)(5)—statutes that relate to marriage witnesses—to conform with changes made in section 2 of the bill.

Repeals AS 25.05.171(b)—the statute that allows a superior court judge to grant permission for a person who has reached the age of 14, but is under the age of 18, to marry. The effect of this repeal is to limit child marriage to individuals who are 16 or 17 years old and have parental consent as set forth in AS 25.05.171(a).

[1:40:19 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON asked the sponsor to walk through the process for two people to get married should this bill pass, and how that changes the current practice.

[1:40:38 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CLAMAN said he could provide his personal experience as an elected official who officiated a marriage. The two individuals got a marriage license from the Bureau of Vital Statistics and he performed the ceremony. Afterward, the two individuals signed the certificate, he signed as the officiant and solemnizer of the marriage, and two witnesses signed. The wedding couple may or may not know the witnesses, but those signatures did not appear on the certificate. The difference now is that the second person to sign the certificate, in addition to the person solemnizing the marriage would be the verifier. Because a lot of weddings now take place on mountain tops and other not readily available locations, the verifier can sign after the ceremony. They do not need to be present, but they must sign soon after the ceremony. The certificate would have the names of the verifier and solemnizer as well as all their contact information, which would be helpful if somebody were to dispute the marriage.

[1:42:22 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON referenced Section 2 and asked what requirements the person verifying the marriage had to fulfill.

REPRESENTATIVE CLAMAN answered that a verifier has to be 18 years of age or older.

CHAIR WILSON asked if they verify the intent, but not the actual wedding.

REPRESENTATIVE CLAMAN answered yes; it's an effort to accommodate weddings that take place on top of a mountain or some other out of the way place that may be costly to reach. The verifier would need to talk with the couple either before or after the ceremony to ensure that both parties intend to marry the other. Presuming they did, the verifier could sign the certificate before or after the ceremony, but would not be required to attend.

SENATOR REINBOLD noted that the sponsor had worked on the issue for years and questioned why he thought it was so important.

REPRESENTATIVE CLAMAN offered his belief that marriage is one of the greatest things a person ever does, and he sees this as a

way that the state can help make this a memorable experience instead of one fraught with problems associated with getting the right paperwork. He said he tends to agree with the notion that the state should not be involved in marriage ceremonies, but the state does get involved when there is a divorce because churches are not good at handling dissolutions. He related that when he introduced this bill, a wedding photographer called to say that the bill was a way to demonstrate that Alaska is ready and open for business. The problem he's experienced is that couples want to fly to the top of a mountain in a helicopter for their wedding ceremony and they want help with the requirement that they must pay for two extra seats for the verifiers.

1:45:02 PM

SENATOR COSTELLO asked him to describe the repealed sections listed on page 6, line 2, and the amendment that passed on the House floor.

REPRESENTATIVE CLAMAN explained that AS 25.05.171(b) is the procedure for the court to approve someone to marry when the person is at least 14 years of age but under 18 years of age. This currently comes up in two situations but the courts have not had this come up for more than a decade. In 2007 and 2008 there were five or six cases that come up seeking court authorization to marry and he recalled that two or three were approved and the same number were dismissed.

1:46:22 PM

SENATOR HUGHES joined the committee.

CHAIR WILSON asked whether it wouldn't more accurately reflect the intent for the new language in Section 2 to talk about the person verifying the intent of the marriage instead of simply the person verifying the marriage. He also questioned why there shouldn't be two people to verify the intent instead of just the one.

REPRESENTATIVE CLAMAN acknowledged that he had quite a lot of discussion with Representative Vance about the importance of having two witnesses and whether that was in scripture. The bill calls two witnesses; one is the person who officiates the wedding and the other is the verifier.

SENATOR HUGHES expressed concerned that the verifier may or may not know that they are supposed to communicate with the two people getting married to ensure that they know what they're

doing, which is that each party intends to marry the other party.

[1:48:19 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CLAMAN said he believes that a person who is verifying a marriage would not be willing to sign their name and give all their contact information without knowing why they're doing so.

SENATOR HUGHES said her concern is that the couple getting married might be less than forthcoming when they ask someone to verify their marriage. They might simply show a photo and ask somebody to verify that they got married. She asked if the state has a standard form for proof of marriage and, if so, she wondered whether it should have a statement that verifying the marriage includes having a conversation with the couple about their intent.

[1:49:41 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CLAMAN answered that the current form does not have such a statement and he didn't think there was much confusion about what people mean to do when they get married. What often happens today when it's a destination wedding on top of a mountain, the couple solicits witnesses by offering a free flight. The witnesses go to the wedding and sign the certificate but they do not give any identifying information so there is no guarantee they could be found later if there was a question about the marriage.

SENATOR HUGHES asked if the state has a standard form to verify the wedding and, if so, whether he would agree to the language she described earlier about the obligation of being a verifier.

[1:51:41 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CLAMAN replied that there is a state form, but the statute also allows churches or congregations to use their own form as long as it has the same basic information as the state form. If the minimum requirements are fulfilled, the marriage certificate can be issued by the religious institution. He opined that adding language to the state form might create unnecessary challenges.

SENATOR HUGHES offered her view that it would be wise for the state and church form to have the information about what it means to verify a marriage ceremony. In light of the huge issue associated with human and sex trafficking, she said it's important for the verifier to know that neither party is being

forced into a marriage. She suggested having a conversation offline because, "Putting forward laws and having something in our statutes both that people don't know and they're inadvertently breaking the law, I don't think that's good practice."

SENATOR REINBOLD asked the sponsor if he had seen the letter from Alaska Family Action Council.

CHAIR WILSON advised that the letter just came in and had not been uploaded to BASIS.

[1:54:00 PM](#)

SENATOR REINBOLD relayed that the letter includes a reference to Representative Johnson's point that Alaska's marriage laws are inconsistent. A 14-year-old is able to get contraceptives or even an abortion without parental consent or knowledge, but they can't get married even with parental consent. She said she supports efforts to prevent sex trafficking and asked the sponsor if that was his primary intent.

[1:55:32 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CLAMAN said the child marriage provision was added in a house floor amendment and he fully supports those efforts. It's a positive step toward preventing all sex trafficking.

[1:56:04 PM](#)

At ease.

[1:58:08 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON reconvened the meeting and advised that copies of the letter that Senator Reinbold mentioned would be distributed to committee members and the sponsor and it would also be uploaded to BASIS. He noted that the sponsor had other pressing business and asked if he had any closing remarks.

REPRESENTATIVE CLAMAN thanked the chair for hearing the bill and expressed appreciation for the questions.

[1:59:08 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON opened invited testimony.

[1:59:21 PM](#)

JOE CONNELLY, Owner, Chugach Peaks Photography, Anchorage, Alaska, stated that he supports the amendment to increase the

age for marriage, but his testimony was about the long-standing requirement to have two witnesses at a wedding ceremony. He stated that he had been photographing weddings since 2006, and in 2019 he approached Representative Claman for help with the burdensome issue of requiring two witnesses at a marriage. He related that 400-500 people come to Alaska each year to get married, and many do not bring family or friends. There are also up to 4,500 weddings of local Alaskans each year, many without family or friends present.

MR. CONNELLY opined that requiring two witnesses to be present at a wedding is an unfair burden that often falls on the marriage commissioner or pastor. This is who is often tasked with finding two witnesses to fulfill the state requirement. The witnesses are doing it as a favor to the officiant.

MR. CONNELLY pointed out that many people choose Alaska as a destination for their wedding because of its remoteness and scenic beauty. The state has made it easy for anyone who is over age 18 and of sound mind to perform a marriage ceremony. They only need to make a quick visit to the court to pick up a one-day marriage commissioner license. But then the state proceeds to make it difficult when it says the couple must find two people to go along to witness the ceremony, regardless of location and the cost and difficulty of getting there. He described this as an unfair limitation on people's choices and freedom that serves no purpose. The person who is solemnizing the wedding already has recognized that the couple wants to be married and are doing so willingly. The witnesses may well be perfect strangers who do not give any identifying information and probably couldn't be found later if they are indeed supposed to serve as a backup in case the marriage license is lost. Instead, the officiant or the verifier could serve in that capacity.

MR. CONNELLY concluded his testimony, urging the committee to pass HB 62 thereby eliminating the requirement for two witnesses to be present at a marriage ceremony.

[2:05:51 PM](#)

DAWN TYREE, Founding Member, National Coalition to End Child Marriage in the United States, Kodiak, Alaska, stated that she is a survivor of child marriage. After two years of sexual assault, she was forced to marry her abuser when she became pregnant. She was expecting her second child when she was 14, and at age 16 she decided to flee the marriage. Because she was a minor she could not go to a women's shelter or rent a hotel

room and she couldn't go to her parents because they had disowned her for leaving the marriage. She had nobody to provide child care or help her get on her feet. When the court allowed her [ex-husband] to have unsupervised visits with her children, she decided to risk going to jail and losing her children to get away from her abuser and protect her children. They fled to Kodiak, and for the first time she didn't feel she had to look over her shoulder. she was transported across state lines.

MS. TYREE asked the legislature to join the national movement to end child marriage, which is connected to human trafficking.

[2:08:54 PM](#)

SENATOR COSTELLO thanked her for providing her personal and powerful testimony and her leadership in trying to help other young girls who are in similar situations.

SENATOR REINBOLD stated that she would support any bill that stops what Ms. Tyree was forced to experience. She also asked Ms. Tyree to email her recommendations to improve the bill.

[2:11:23 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON advised that written testimony can be sent to shss@akleg.gov, and it will be distributed to the members become part of the record.

[2:12:07 PM](#)

RIMI NASHASHIBI, Founder and President, Global Hope 365, Tustin, California, summarized her prepared testimony that is on file and posted to BASIS. She urged the committee to support the current version of HB 62, and to take the additional step of raising the minimum age of marriage to 18 years old with no exceptions. She related that Global Hope 365 is a 501(c)3 nonprofit whose focus is to end harmful practices against women and girls such as child marriage, human trafficking, and other forms of gender-based violence perpetrated locally and nationally.

The current version of HB 62 harms no one, costs nothing, and ends the specific form of child abuse that is child marriage. It can be a coverup for statutory rape tied to human trafficking or sexual exploitation; shield parents who are abusive, neglectful, or unfit; and help parents avoid further responsibility for a child.

Child marriage is a serious problem in the US today. She reported that between 2000 and 2018, more than 300,000 minors

were married, mostly girls married to adult men. About 88 percent of these marriages prevented these would be rapists from going to jail under state law that specifically allows within marriage would otherwise be statutory rape.

According to the Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics 2020 annual report, 2,113 people between the ages of 15 and 19 were married between 2016 and 2020. She emphasized that children lack the rights, knowledge, and resources of adults, and are more vulnerable to coercion and exploitation. Thus, many child marriages are forced or coverups for other abuse, exploitation, and crime such as statutory rape and human trafficking.

MS. NASHASHIBI cited some statistics and findings about child marriage:

- Young women and girls ages 16 to 19 face intimate partner violence victimization rates almost three times the national average and experience 37 percent higher rates of living in poverty.
- Girls who marry early are 50 percent more likely to drop out of high school and four times less likely to graduate from college.
- Minors are more likely to suffer both mental and physical abuse by their husbands, and the trauma can be long lasting.
- The American Medical Association has called for an end to child marriage as it is associated with higher rates of: infant and maternal mortality, sexually transmitted infections, early pregnancy, divorce, and intimate partner violence than women married at age 21.

MS. NASHASHIBI reported that the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2008 provides the following definition of severe forms of sex and labor trafficking:

[when] a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or [when] the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age;

She stated that even though federal trafficking laws do not define forced sex within a forced marriage as a commercial sex act, "human trafficking" arguably can describe some forced marriages. Elements of forced labor may also be present in cases of servile marriage. According to reports of sex trafficking to the National Human Trafficking hotline, in 2019 the top two ways

sex trafficking victims were recruited were through intimate partners or family members.

MS. NASHASHIBI concluded her testimony, reading the last paragraph of her prepared testimony:

HB 62, as amended, harms no one, but saves our children from this type of child abuse and exploitation. I implore you to please vote in favor of HB 62, as amended, and go one step further by raising the minimum age of marriage to 18, no exceptions. Holding firm on the minimum age of marriage to 18, no exceptions has the effect of protecting those who are most vulnerable to being forced or coerced into marriage, namely children. You have within your power the ability to make Alaska a national leader in child protection, joining a growing number of states and territories that have eliminated child marriage in the past five years.

[2:16:39 PM](#)

SENATOR REINBOLD expressed appreciation for her work and the excellent testimony.

CHAIR WILSON thank the individuals who were invited to testify.

[2:17:08 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON public testimony on HB 62.

[2:17:28 PM](#)

FRAIDY REISS, Founder and Executive Director, Unchained At Last, Westfield, New Jersey, stated that she is a published expert and service provider who helps forced and child marriage survivors escape their situations. She urged the committee to amend HB 62 to eliminate all marriage before age 18, with no exceptions. She emphasized that marriage at age 16 or 17 is just as dangerous as marriage at age 14 or 15. She highlighted that current law provides no recourse for a minor whose parents force them into marriage, and that the parents are usually the perpetrators. There is nothing the court can do once the parents sign the consent form. Shelters turn minors away due to liability concerns and any contract with an attorney is likely voidable.

MS. REISS stated that the US State Department categorizes marriage for even for the most mature minor as a human rights abuse. It can have devastating and life-long repercussions affecting health, education, economic opportunities, and

physical safety. Alaska law states that a minor who is married is automatically emancipated, which typically forces the child to become financially dependent on their spouse. Between 70 and 80 percent of marriages before age 18 end in divorce, which can then lead to homelessness. She highlighted that 99 percent of the minors who marry in Alaska are age 16 or 17. This means that 811 of the 823 minors who married in Alaska between 2000 and 2020 were age 16 or 17. As currently written, HB 62 will only protect one percent of the minors it seeks to protect. She noted the unusual military exceptions to marriage in Alaska law and urged the committee to amend HB 62 to raise the age for marriage to 18 with no exceptions, thereby ending child marriage in Alaska.

[2:20:22 PM](#)

SENATOR REINBOLD requested the names and contact information for the last two testifiers.

CHAIR WILSON agreed to share the list of names and organizations, and informed the testifiers that they could reach out to Senator Reinbold at their discretion.

MS. REISS said she was happy to do so.

[2:21:21 PM](#)

REVERAND CIAN MULHERN, Senior Pastor, Celtic Ministries, Wasilla, Alaska, stated that he performs about 150 wedding ceremonies each year, 90 percent of which are destination weddings. He agreed with Mr. Connelly that most of the couples do not bring family or friends to participate in the wedding. He noted the previous testimony about witnesses and the discussion about a verifier and questioned how a person could verify that two people got married if they did not attend the marriage. He said he did not agree with the current two witness requirement since other states require just the officiant and the couple to be present. He pointed out that when a couple applies for a marriage license with the Bureau of Vital Statistics or the court, their signatures at that time are notarized or verified, which indicates that the people understand the implications and importance of what they are doing. He said he didn't know why there was need for a witness because they don't need to give their identifying information.

REVERAND MULHERN stated support for the current version of HB 62 that includes the amendment to end child marriage.

[2:24:04 PM](#)

ALEX GOYETTE, Senior Public Policy Associate, Tahirih Justice Center (Tahirih), Virginia, Alaska, stated that TJC is a national legal services organization that works with the survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, human trafficking, and other forms of abuse that generate violence, including forced marriage. He relayed that Tahirih's forced marriage initiative has helped hundreds of people in the US faced with forced marriage. This includes people in Alaska and, unfortunately, many children. He highlighted that children under age 18 are particularly vulnerable to forced marriage and have limited options to escape or protect themselves because they do not have the legal rights of an adult.

MR. GOYETTE stated that forced marriages in particular can involve both physical violence and extreme psychological abuse. When the parent is the one being coercive, marriage can appear to be the only option for a very dependent teen. Tahirih appreciates the amendment that increases the age of marriage from 14 to 16, but urges the committee to do more to end child marriage by setting the age for marriage to 18. Most children who marry in Alaska are age 16 and 17 but the state still considers them children so they have the limited legal rights of children. This makes it difficult and dangerous to resist a forced marriage or leave an abusive spouse.

MR. GOYETTE cited reasons that current Alaska law poses such serious child protection concerns:

1. The parental consent exception may conceal parental coercion.
2. Alaska not only has the lowest minimum age for marriage of any state statute, but also falls below the state's legal age of consent to have sex. Combined with the state's spousal defense for statutory rape, the current law serves as a workaround for sexual predators.

MR. GOYETTE stated that the current version of HB 62 is a step in the right direction, but more can and should be done to protect Alaska's children by raising the age for marriage to 18, with no exceptions. This will end child marriage.

[2:26:21 PM](#)

GENEVIEVE MEYER, Co-Founder, Resiliency Foundation Fort Wayne, Indiana, stated that the foundation works to end child marriage and support survivors like herself. She described her supportive and fulfilling marriage of 15 years but said this wasn't her first marriage. She shared her story reading the following:

At the age of 15, a 43-year-old alcoholic, unemployed, twice divorced father of two began to prey on me. My mother called the police and pressed charges. He bailed out quickly and got to work to convince my mentally ill mother to let him marry me.

Before this man even made it to his court appearance over charges of lewd acts against me, he convinced my mother that I was the aggressor at the age of 14, that I was troubled and that only he could save me. He was determined to not only escape any legal consequences for his actions, but to also obtain a child bride that he could control and violate without further consequences.

I was then drug to four different states over the course of several weeks. We were finally married, just the two of us in a county courthouse. We arrived home to an eviction notice on the door of his trailer. The charges were dropped against him, and I began my sentence which lasted until I could escape several years later.

My education stopped at 8th grade, I had no control over my body, I could not access a doctor or any kind of family planning. I worked as much as I physically could in "under the radar" jobs because I couldn't apply for a work permit and I wasn't old enough to be legally employed by anybody. And still went hungry; I couldn't purchase things like shampoo and toothpaste on a regular basis. By our second anniversary I began contemplating if I had the will to keep fighting to survive or to end my life. Being a minor, I could not file for divorce or live on my own and death began to look like my only way out. I couldn't drive and was completely isolated. He would encourage me to drink alcohol and to use drugs to "chill out." I knew that if I began using drugs, I would never make it out and refused over and over again.

MS. MEYER continued her testimony:

It took me decades to recover mentally, emotionally, and physically from this traumatic experience. I had to relearn how to be in a normal healthy relationship, to trust again and to not be terrified all the time.

If I had been married at 16 or 17, the circumstances and consequences would have been the same, only for a shorter period of time.

This is the reality of child marriage today. It is used to cover up abuse, traffic, children and evil in general. The data grossly underrepresents child brides quietly suffering across our nation. We are isolated but we are not invisible, we are hiding in plain sight all around you.

My first marriage was not a marriage, child marriage and these sick excuses for abuse and violation make a mockery of the beauty that is marriage. Please help us close this loophole so that not one single girl must live through the nightmare that I did.

I am asking today on behalf of myself, my fellow sisters who cannot speak up, the older church ladies who tell me that even though they married young, it's not the same today. Please raise the minimum age to marry in Alaska to 18-years-of-age, no exceptions, because none of us are safe until all of us are safe.

CHAIR WILSON thanked her for her testimony.

[2:30:45 PM](#)

SENATOR COSTELLO stated that the committee appreciates the courage it took to testify today and share your story.

CHAIR WILSON advised that the committee was not currently considering an amendment to HB 62 but one was likely forthcoming. He asked the sponsor to provide his written comments on the suggested amendment to raise the minimum age of marriage in Alaska to 18.

[2:31:49 PM](#)

CHAIR WILSON held CSHB 62(JUD) am in committee.

[2:32:34 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Wilson adjourned the Senate Health and Social Services Standing Committee meeting at 2:32 p.m.