



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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**Testimony Re: House Bill 5387, An Act Relating to Domestic Relations
– Marriage Licenses**

House Judiciary Committee

February 23, 2021

Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit this written testimony today. We would also like to thank Representative Casimiro and the co-sponsors, Representatives Noret, Vella-Wilkinson, Caldwell, Alzate, and Kazarian, for introducing this important bill.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its strong support for House Bill 5387. This bill would require a person to be at least age 18 to obtain a marriage license.

Current Rhode Island law requires a person to be age 18 or older to obtain a marriage license, but it also includes language that allows a child age 16 or age 17 to obtain a marriage license if the child's parent or legal guardian submits a request in writing to the town or city issuing the license, and that allows a child age 14 or age 15 to obtain a marriage license with the approval of the Rhode Island Family Court. These loopholes that allow children under age 18 to obtain marriage licenses and enter into marriages, which are legally binding agreements, are outdated based on current research into adolescent brain development and have the potential to endanger children through entry into sexual coercion and/or trafficking. **According to Unchained At Last, Rhode Island issued 32 marriage licenses to children ages 14 to 18 between 2013 and 2019, and 88% of these licenses were issued to girls under age 18 who were then married to adult men.**

According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the part of the brain that controls reasoning and helps us fully think through the implications of our behavior – the frontal cortex – develops beginning in adolescence and continuing into early adulthood, and this can be further delayed when alcohol or drug use are present. This ongoing development of the frontal cortex means that adolescents make decisions and solve problems differently than adults. Adolescents are more likely to be impulsive, misread social and emotional situations, get into accidents and fights, and engage in risk taking behaviors. They are also less likely to avoid risky situations and to fully consider all of the possible consequences of their actions. Adolescents need guidance from caring adults to develop these skills and learn to manage their behaviors as their brain develops.

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We strongly urge you to support this legislation and to protect our children from entering into marriage contracts that they do not fully understand and that could put them at risk.