

State of Rhode Island
OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE



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HOUSE COMMITTEE ON JUDICIARY
House Bill 5387
February 23, 2021

Thank you, Chairman Craven and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 5387 which requires a person to be at least 18 years of age in order to obtain a marriage license.

My name is Jennifer Griffith and I am the Child Advocate for the State of Rhode Island. I am the Director of the agency which serves as the oversight to the Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF). As part of our role as the oversight agency, we monitor the case of each child and young adult open to the Department to protect their legal rights and to promote policies and practices which ensure that youth are safe, and that their physical, mental, medical, educational, emotional, and behavioral health needs are met.

We know that maturation and critical brain development occurs during adolescence and continues well into early adulthood. During adolescence, critical structural development impacts areas of the brain which control higher cognitive functions including behavioral control, planning functions, and critical assessment needed for decision-making. As a result, adolescents may make decisions based on heightened emotions and can be more susceptible to the influence of peers. Therefore, the decision to enter into a marriage, even with the support of a parent or guardian, can be deeply harmful. Research on the impacts of early marriage, which more often impacts girls, shows it can cause interruptions in formal education resulting in lower earnings, increased rates of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, and can have negative long-term effects on physical and mental health.

My office supports passage of House Bill 5387 to require a person to be at least 18 years of age in order to obtain a marriage license.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jennifer Griffith".

Jennifer Griffith, Esq.
Child Advocate