



AMERICAN ATHEISTS

March 31, 2025

The Honorable Sen. Anne Carney and Rep. Amy Kuhn
Chairs, Committee on Judiciary
2 State House Station
Augusta, Maine 04333

Re: SUPPORT LD 1185, Ending Child Marriage

Dear Chairpersons Carney and Kuhn, and Members of the Committee on Judiciary:

American Atheists, on behalf of its constituents in Maine, thanks you for holding a hearing on LD 1185, a bill to protect young people by ending child marriage. This bill would protect children from being coerced into marriage against their will, a harmful and archaic practice that happens all too frequently across the country. We urge you to support this necessary 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 atheists are accepted as members of our nation’s communities and where 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, especially due to the religious beliefs of their parents or guardians.

Currently, Maine allows children as young as seventeen to marry and, appallingly, provides no additional guardrails to protect children from forced marriage. Over 1,100 children were married in Maine between 2000 and 2023, with the vast majority of these marriages (77%) consisting of a minor girl being wed to an adult man.¹

The harm caused by child marriage cannot be understated. Young people who marry before the age of eighteen are significantly more likely to experience disastrous health, education, and economic outcomes and have a heightened risk of experiencing violence. They have a 70- to 80-percent 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 remain single.² Even if the marriage does not end in

¹ *Child Marriage in Maine*. Unchained At Last. (2025). Available at: <https://www.unchainedatlast.org/child-marriage-in-maine>.

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>.

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225 Cristiani Street • Cranford, NJ 07016-3214
(908) 276-7300 • www.atheists.org

divorce, child brides are more likely to drop out of high school, less likely to attend college, and often spend their lives in poverty.³ Raising the minimum age of marriage to eighteen means that hundreds of children in Maine will be spared the heartbreaking consequences of child marriage.

Child marriage creates an inescapable legal gray area, where children can enter a marriage but have no ability to leave. In many cases, children are coerced into marriage by their parents. Children experiencing teen pregnancy and financial instability, for example, are at risk of being coerced into entering a marriage they do not want by their parents.⁴ When this happens, the children face overwhelming legal and practical barriers to escaping the marriage because, as minors, they are unable to access many of the resources that are available to adults, including domestic violence shelters or even retaining a divorce attorney. The only way to safeguard against the potentially horrific outcomes associated with child marriage is to prevent children from marrying without exceptions.

LD 1185 would ensure children throughout Maine can no longer be placed in harm's way or be forced to marry adults before they have even had the opportunity to graduate high school. We strongly urge you to advance this bill and protect young people from coerced marriage.

Should you have any questions regarding American Atheists' support for LD 1185, please contact me at vanderson@atheists.org.

Sincerely,



Victoria Anderson
State Policy Specialist
American Atheists

³ Fraidy Reiss, "Child Marriage in the United States: Prevalence and Implications" (2021). *Journal of Adolescent Health*. Available at: [https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(21\)00341-4/fulltext](https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(21)00341-4/fulltext).

⁴ Paige Cassidy and Tyehimba Turner, "The Fight Continues to End Child Marriage in the U.S." (2021). UNICEF USA. Available at: <https://www.unicefusa.org/stories/fight-continues-end-child-marriage-us>.