



SENATE MAJORITY OFFICE

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Policy to Protect Children from Exploitation by Marriage Advances in the Oregon Senate

Unsafe current law permits marriage licenses for 17-year-olds in Oregon

SALEM, OR – The Oregon Senate united for true child safety today, voting to raise the state’s legal minimum age for marriage from 17 to 18 years old.

Present state law lets 17-year-olds officially marry in Oregon when they have one parent or guardian’s permission, and the young person’s own consent is not required. This policy has allowed more than 2,900 adult men to get Oregon marriage licenses with teenage girls between 2000 and 2021.

“As a community, our hearts break to contemplate the situations those children endured,” said **Senator Janeen Sollman (D – Forest Grove)**, chief co-sponsor of the bill passed today, SB 548. “Whatever outdated values underpinned the current law, Oregonians today understand how potentially abusive and dangerous it is for children, especially girls, to be legally married as minors.”

The vote to raise the marriage age was 28 to 1 and followed thoughtful remarks from both Democrats and Republicans.

“Oregon needs us to do better for kids” said **Senator David Brock Smith (R – Port Orford)**, Sollman’s co-chief in sponsoring the measure. “Raising the minimum marriage age strengthens legal protections against sexual exploitation.”

Marriage to a 17-year-old shields a child rapist from charges. Up to now, an adult’s sexual contact with a minor who is three or more years younger is a crime, but not if the two are married. Marriage as a minor also ends eligibility for child protective services and a parent’s obligation of financial support. Being a minor makes it nearly impossible for an exploited young person to retain legal counsel, independently bring legal action or file protective orders.

“This has nothing to do with maturity. No one wakes up on their 18th birthday with newfound wisdom or ability to make decisions,” Becca Powell of the human rights charity Unchained At

Last explained in a public hearing on SB 548. “But what they do wake up with is all the rights of adulthood they didn’t have the day before.”

SB 548 next goes to the Oregon House of Representatives for consideration. If the measure is signed into law, Oregon will join only 13 other states with a minimum legal marriage age of 18.

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