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Attorneys

Greenberg Traurig Attorney Works to End Child Marriage in Texas

By PETER HAYES

Greenberg Traurig attorney and lobbyist Elizabeth Ross Hadley is no stranger to the political process, having worked in Congress and for state government in Texas.

So when the firm was asked to help push through legislation to curtail child marriage in the Lone Star State, Hadley was asked if she'd be interested.

"It was my first opportunity to work on a pro bono legislative matter," Hadley told Bloomberg BNA.

More than 200,000 people under age 18 married in the U.S. between 2000 and 2015, according to figures released by the Tahirih Justice Center.

The center, based in Falls Church, Va., is a non-profit organization working to end violence against immigrant women and girls, according to its website.

Most child marriages in the U.S. involve girls who marry adult men, the group said. And most states set the minimum age for marriage at 18, but permit exceptions.

"Texas has some of the highest numbers of underage marriage in the country," Hadley said.

Tahirih Justice Center was working on the issue when they approached Greenberg Traurig in Houston.

"They needed someone who knows the Texas capital and the legislative process," Hadley said.

In addition to her lobbying work at her firm, Hadley has legislative and agency experience working in the U.S. Senate, the Texas State Senate and the Texas Department of Agriculture.

"They had language drafted before I got involved, and had a (state) senator tentatively on board, but needed to confirm that as well as find a representative to file the bill. We also revised the language from the bill draft to address some concerns identified," she said.

Ultimately, the Texas Legislature approved bipartisan legislation proposed by state Sen. Van Taylor (R-Plano) and Rep. Senfronia Thompson (D-Houston). Gov. Greg Abbott (R) signed the bill in June and it took effect September 1.

Before the law, which established a floor of age 16 for marriage, a child could wed at any age with court approval, Hadley said. She noted that children could be forced into marriage by a variety of reasons.

According to the Tahirih Justice Center, children may be threatened with violence, ostracism, economic deprivation, and harm to loved ones.

"Now, if the child is between the ages of 16 and 18, they have to become emancipated in order to marry," Hadley said.

Children may be emancipated in Texas at 16 if a court finds it in their best interests to live apart from their parents and they have managed their own finances.

Hadley said the law will make a difference for children in Texas.

"I'm thrilled that Greenberg Traurig encourages us to work on pro bono cases and this was a great experience for me," she said.

She said the firm is now working with Tahirih Justice Center on the same issue in Florida.

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