

# SBOT Legislative and Campaign Law Council Member Assists in Passing Texas Senate Bill 1705 to End Underage Marriage of Children in Texas

Council Member Elizabeth Ross Hadley of global law firm [Greenberg Traurig, LLP](#) secured a significant victory for pro bono client, the Tahirih Justice Center, and for minor children across the state of Texas. [Elizabeth, Of Counsel at Greenberg Traurig and Secretary of the SBOT Legislative and Campaign Law Council](#), was instrumental in lobbying for the passage of Senate Bill 1705 (SB 1705), proposed by Sen. Van Taylor (R-Plano) and Rep. Senfronia Thompson (D-Houston) during the 85<sup>th</sup> legislative session. Aaron Gregg, Associate at Greenberg Traurig, LLP, worked with Elizabeth on the legislative effort as well. The Texas legislature overwhelmingly passed this bipartisan bill and Governor Greg Abbott signed it into law June 15, 2017.

SB 1705 offers simple, but powerful protection for girls to prevent them from being forced into marriage against their will, by requiring that anyone who marries in Texas must be a legal adult—either age 18 or older, or a minor age 16 or 17 who has been court-emancipated. If a genuine couple wishes to marry, they can still do so as long as any minor party gets emancipated.

“Among other safeguards built into the emancipation process, the minor is appointed an attorney, must demonstrate that she is self-supporting and managing her own affairs, and the judge must find it’s in her best interest to be emancipated. So if an at-risk girl is being forced or coerced, this process will connect her with an advocate who can help her get to safety. And if a minor is emancipated and then marries and faces abuse, this process ensures that she’s someone with the wherewithal to escape a violent home, rather than being trapped for years without resources or options,” explains Jeanne Smoot, Senior Counsel for Policy and Strategy at the Tahirih Justice Center, the firm’s pro bono client. “With this new law, young women will be empowered and enabled to resist or prevent an unwanted marriage, and to escape any abuse or exploitation they may face. We are so grateful for the assistance we received from the stellar and deeply dedicated Greenberg Traurig team. Their tireless commitment to pro bono and to children in the state of Texas was critical to this landmark result.”

Texas did not have a minimum age for a child to marry. This bill effectively puts in a floor of age 16 and helps ensure that 16 and 17 year olds are marrying of their own free will.

“It was incredibly rewarding to represent the Tahirih Justice Center as a pro bono lobby client and assist in passing such meaningful legislation. This law will change the lives of

many children and their families in Texas. I was astonished to learn nearly 40,000 underage children had been married in Texas in the last decade, so I was very proud to be part of the effort to end that. I am thankful to be part of a firm that holds pro bono work in such high regard. Greenberg Traurig not only allows us to take on these cases, but encourages us to do so through education and development. I encourage other lobbyists to consider taking on pro bono matters as this is another way to represent clients on a pro bono basis beyond traditional legal representation.”

“This is a remarkable result that prioritizes the protection of children from coercion into underage marriages that may subject them to physical and emotional abuse,” said [Caroline Heller](#), chair of Greenberg Traurig LLP’s [Global Pro Bono Program](#). “Protecting those who are most vulnerable to abuse and exploitation is at the heart of Greenberg Traurig’s Pro Bono Program.”

### **About Tahirih Justice Center**

Tahirih Justice Center is a national non-profit that protects women and girls fleeing violence through free legal and social services, public policy advocacy, and training and education with offices in Houston, the San Francisco Bay area, Baltimore, and the Greater Washington, DC area. Visit [preventforcedmarriage.org](http://preventforcedmarriage.org) to learn more about Tahirih’s national initiative to prevent forced marriages.

### **About Greenberg Traurig’s Pro Bono Program**

Greenberg Traurig lawyers across the firm’s offices provide pro bono legal services to the indigent and working poor, as well as to numerous civic and charitable organizations dedicated to assisting them. The firm focuses its resources on specialized and interrelated issues including civil rights and affirmative action, anti-human trafficking, family law matters, criminal appeals, immigration and political asylum, housing and homelessness.

### **About Greenberg Traurig, LLP – Texas**

Greenberg Traurig has more than 100 attorneys in Texas, serving clients from offices in Austin, Dallas and Houston.

### **About Greenberg Traurig, LLP**

Greenberg Traurig, LLP (GTLaw) has more than 2,000 attorneys in 38 offices in the United States, Latin America, Europe, Asia and the Middle East and is celebrating its 50th anniversary. One firm worldwide, GTLaw has been recognized for its philanthropic giving, was named the largest firm in the U.S. by *Law360* in 2017, and among the Top 20 on the 2016 *Am Law* Global 100. Web: [www.gtlaw.com](http://www.gtlaw.com) Twitter: @GT\_Law.