

'We can't abandon these children' Louisiana bill to extend foster care age get surprise approval  
"I can't believe we got it out," said author Sen. Ryan Gatti, R-Bossier City

Author: Greg Hilburn, USA TODAY Network

Published: 4:43 AM CDT April 10, 2018

Updated: 4:43 AM CDT April 10, 2018

BATON ROUGE — A bill that to extend the age of foster care in Louisiana to 21 won surprise approval in committee here Monday following an emotional presentation and testimony that left some panel members in tears.

The Senate Finance Committee has put aside every bill this session that would increase state spending as Louisiana grapples with a looming \$692 million deficit.

But in the end Senate Bill 129 was too compelling to turn down.

"I can't believe we got it out," said author Sen. Ryan Gatti, R-Bossier City, who gathered outside the committee room with as many as 20 foster kids, foster parents and foster officials to give a prayer of thanks afterward.

"It's a tragedy when these kids turn 18 they're put out on the street," Gatti said. "We can't abandon these children."

Sen. Ronnie Johns, R-Lake Charles, himself an adoptive father, told Gatti, "It's the best bill of the session."

Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services Secretary Marketa Walters, who was among those in tears, said about 180 children age out of the foster care system each year at 18 without finishing high school.

Of those, she said 20 percent end up in jail and 25 percent end up homeless. "(This week) two were found in a laundromat," she said.

Another foster child testified about changing schools 36 times, throwing her behind her grade level.

Cheri Breaux of Lafayette and her adopted 17-year-old daughter Hope Breaux were among those supporting the bill at the hearing.

"I've started a nonprofit to help (those who age out), but I can't do it by myself," said Cheri Breaux, pointing to her daughter as inspiration.

Gatti and others said many foster families can't afford to continue to care for their foster children once the state subsidy ends at 18.

"If ever there was a group we should help it would be these children," said Sen. Sharon Hewitt,

R-Slidell. "If we can't find \$1 million in a \$15 billion budget we will have failed miserably in this session."

Walters estimated the cost of expanding the age to 21 at almost \$1 million annually, which would be matched with \$3 million from the federal government.