

La. Senate panel approves 'historic' extension of foster care program

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Foster parents and families watch in committee (Source: WAFB)

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BATON ROUGE, LA (WAFB) - With the budget crisis looming in the backdrop, Louisiana lawmakers have been hesitant about adding new expenses.

However, after emotional testimony in Senate committee Monday morning, a panel of state senators made an exception, voting to extend the state's foster care program.

Currently, foster kids are kicked out of the system at age 18. At that point, the state stops providing funding to foster parents to help cover costs.

SB 129 by Sen. Ryan Gatti, R-Bossier City, would boost the cutoff age to 21, giving kids extra time to get a high school diploma. Gatti told the panel that they cannot "abandon" those children.

The change will cost taxpayers approximately \$1 million each year, according to an estimate by the Legislative Fiscal Office.

"I know where these kids end up if they don't stay in care: incarcerated, trafficked. That costs the state a lot of money as well. So just from a pure budgetary standpoint, this can save the state some money," argued Sage Easter, a foster mom from Bossier City.

The Senate Finance committee approved the measure without objection.

Marketa Walters, secretary for the Department of Children and Family Services, described the bill's approval as a "historic moment."

"These are fragile families, we serve the most fragile families in Louisiana. And you cannot leave foster youth hanging, you cannot leave foster parents hanging," she said.

In order to pay for the change, Senate lawmakers decided to divert money from the BP settlement to the foster program.

The bill now heads to the full Senate for consideration.

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