

# APPENDIX M

## Foster Programs

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**A few years ago, the idea of sending a shelter pet to a temporary home, through foster placement, was rare.** The “closed door” model of animal sheltering limited community resources to providing for the housing of animals only in the shelter itself. Today, foster placement has become a key program for saving the lives of homeless pets. These days, you’d be hard-pressed to find a shelter or rescue group that doesn’t have some element of foster care in their operations or isn’t working on creating a foster program. In this appendix, I’ll share everything animal welfare professionals need to know to start and operate a foster care program, as well as how to avoid and overcome common challenges and barriers we find in foster care.

### Who can be a foster caregiver

Foster caregivers come from all walks of life. Some are parents who want to teach their children important lessons about helping pets in need. Others are individuals who want to help shelter pets, but are not able or ready to make the lifelong commitment of pet adoption. Some foster caregivers have cats, dogs or other pets in their homes, while others do not. Some have small children in their homes while others do not. Some can take a pet for an afternoon or a day, while others are able to provide temporary homes for many months. Foster caregivers may be older people who live in assisted living facilities or college students living in student housing.

It doesn’t take special skills or abilities to foster — simply the desire to help provide life-saving care for a pet in need. Just about every person in your community is a potential foster caregiver.

## Animals served by foster programs

When foster programs first emerged more than two decades ago, they were geared toward helping animals who couldn't survive in the shelter setting. Foster programs primarily served populations such as orphaned kittens and puppies, pets with upper respiratory illness, and pets recovering from sickness or injury. Back then, when pets were either euthanized or left the shelter through adoption or rescue group placement, foster care was an alternative to immediate euthanasia in the shelter. When pets were not available for adoption because they were too young or sick, foster care was often the only lifesaving outcome.

Today, foster programs have expanded to serve each and every type of shelter pet. Some of the groups of pets who are saved through foster programs include:

- Orphaned and juvenile kittens, puppies and small animals
- Sick or injured animals
- Healthy adult cats, dogs and other pets
- Senior and geriatric animals
- Pets near the end of their lives who enter homes for “fospice” care
- Any animal who is at risk of being killed because of lack of space in the shelter
- Animals with behavior challenges, including fearful, undersocialized animals who are not able to be handled in the shelter environment
- Animals who come into the shelter with no behavior issues, but who decline in the shelter environment

All foster programs are unique in structure, but some shelters have doubled their capacity through some type of foster programming. In large shelters, a couple thousand cats and dogs can be housed in foster homes each year.

## Types of foster placement

Foster placement is a program that sends shelter pets temporarily out of the shelter to off-site homes. Depending on the age, health, species, size and behavior of a particular pet, the type of foster placement will vary widely. Below are descriptions of some of the common types of foster placements.

**Field trip fostering.** A field trip may last anywhere from an hour to an entire day and is usually geared toward healthy adult dogs. Field trips provide a much-needed break for the dogs from the stress of shelter life, while providing valuable exposure to and behavior notes for potential adopters. Some common field trips include taking a hike, visiting a local pet store, or relaxing at a park or foster caregiver's home.

**Overnight and weekend fostering.** This program is also geared toward dogs but provides a longer break from the shelter than field trip fostering. For shelters that are closed one or more days a week, building an overnight foster program means dogs can live in homes on closed days, and return to the shelter calmer and more adoptable.

**Short-term foster placement.** This program is commonly used as a tool for assessment and the gathering of behavior notes. Most shelters are moving away from the traditional model of temperament testing, and instead consider each pet as an individual with a unique history, set of needs, likes and dislikes. More and more information and research<sup>1</sup> is emerging that shows us it is impossible to know or understand particular pets' personalities in the shelter. Foster placement, for a few days or a couple of weeks, can help shelter staff understand what pets are like in a home environment. For dogs and cats who are fearful, shut down or reactive in a shelter environment, foster placement can be truly lifesaving.

**Medical foster placement.** This may include fostering young animals who need around-the-clock care, pets recovering from injuries or surgeries, and animals with treatable illnesses. These pets are almost always more likely to thrive in a foster home than in a shelter.

**Senior and geriatric pet fostering.** In the earlier years of animal welfare, older pets were often euthanized if they were over a certain age, or if they experienced any age-related problems, such as dental disease, arthritis or incontinence. The idea behind this was that no one would want these "less desirable" animals. We have since learned that nothing could be further from the truth; most older pets fly out of animal shelters through rescue or adoption. For those who are geriatric or very old with medical issues, foster care is an important option. Shelter life is particularly hard on older pets and fostering can allow these animals to leave the shelter almost immediately. In foster homes, they can lounge on a comfy couch while they wait for new families.

**Fostering for pets with behavior challenges.** Dogs who are jumpy and mouthy in the shelter, undersocialized indoor cats, barrier-reactive pooches, and pets who are fearful or hard to handle may need nothing more than to be outside of the confines of the shelter in order to thrive. A 2014 study shows that the stress levels of shelter pets may be generally lower when they are in foster care.<sup>2</sup>

**Emergency foster placement.** These programs act as a safety net during intense times of need. Lack of kennel space during certain seasons and events like fireworks and natural disasters used to spell death for homeless pets, once a shelter reached capacity. Today, fostering is the key solution for making space in an emergency. By putting out a

plea to the public and being transparent about the situation, shelters are finding emergency foster caregivers in droves, with people forming lines at the shelter doors.

## Why foster care is important

The traditional sheltering model mandated that we keep our doors relatively closed to the people who live in our communities. We didn't ask for help from volunteers or foster caregivers and had strict limitations on the public's access to the animals in shelters. In those days, shelter staff bore the burden of this "closed door" model, which resulted in millions of pets being killed each year, simply because our communities didn't have access to the pets who needed them most.

Foster care represents a complete departure from that antiquated model of animal sheltering. Foster care is guided by an ethic that asks the public for help we need it, teaches them how they can save lives, and allows all healthy and treatable animals to be available for foster placement. Shelters that choose to implement high-volume, comprehensive foster programs have found that every time they ask for help, their communities answer their call. With the public's help, our lifesaving capacity is virtually limitless.

Here are the top eight reasons why foster care is a key solution for the challenges of modern animal sheltering:

- 1. Fostering frees up valuable kennel space.** A high-functioning foster program may have 1,000 pets in foster care at any given time. If you think about each foster placement as a kennel, that's an entire shelter of kennel space.
- 2. Fostering is safe.** One of the ongoing concerns expressed about foster programs is whether they are safe for pets and people. The answer is a resounding "yes." What we've learned is that the more time dogs and cats spend living in a kennel environment, receiving only a few minutes outside of a cage each day, the less safe they become to handle. "Behavioral decline" is still a main reason given for euthanasia, and pets become more at risk the longer they spend in the shelter. Foster care is a much safer housing solution and it helps staff learn so much more about pets than we can ever learn while they're living under the extreme stress of the kennel environment.
- 3. Fostering is cost-effective for your shelter.** Some shelters provide food and supplies for foster caregivers, while others ask foster caregivers to provide food and supplies for their foster pets. Some may provide specialty supplies and medications, but ask foster caregivers to purchase food and treats. All of these models have been successful in different communities. Even fiscally conservative local government leaders, who believe in lifesaving but are unable to allocate large amounts of money in programs, can get on board with foster care programs. Housing pets in foster homes means shelters may reduce the number of staff hours dedicated to care and feeding in the shelter.

4. **Fostering saves the lives of your most medically vulnerable populations.** In most shelters, animals are left alone for roughly 12 hours each night. For very young and sick animals, this may lead to pets needlessly dying overnight. Foster care is a better option for these animals, since no one is more diligent than your average foster caregiver in ensuring that sick or injured pets receive around-the-clock care and attention.
5. **Foster care is the most humane way to house homeless pets.** Even a modern, well-designed shelter is a terrifying place for most animals. Anyone who has worked or volunteered in an animal shelter has witnessed a cat or dog cowering in his kennel, shaking and paralyzed with fear. For pets who cannot tolerate the noise and stress of this unnatural environment, foster placement is a much more humane housing solution while they wait to be adopted.
6. **Foster care shortens the average length-of-stay.** Field trip and overnight foster programs for dogs have been shown to reduce the length-of-stay for pets who otherwise may have waited months to get noticed. Shelters that allow volunteers, staff and even members of the public to take dogs on short foster outings are finding, time and time again, that these dogs are adopted quickly.
7. **Foster programs provide free, fast marketing of your shelter pets.** If your shelter does not have a dedicated communications or marketing staff person, you can ask foster families to take photos and videos of their foster pets, which can be shared online to help market those pets for adoption.
8. **Foster care provides a lifeline for your pets with behavior challenges.** Years ago, dogs and cats who displayed undesirable behaviors in the shelter (e.g., a dog who growled and huddled in the back of his kennel, a cat who hissed and panicked when a staff member attempted to pick her up) were euthanized. Today, killing shelter pets because of their behavior is largely unnecessary, due to the implementation of foster programs, in combination with play groups, kennel enrichment and volunteer support.

## Necessary elements

For your shelter to implement a comprehensive and successful foster program, there are a number of elements that must be in place.

**A dedicated foster coordinator.** Imagine if one staff member could single-handedly care for and adopt out 1,000 or more pets. That's what a foster coordinator is charged to do. When we consider the incredible lifesaving potential of foster programs, coupled with the fact that foster care presents a low-cost, safe, effective way to serve the majority of shelter pets, it only makes sense that every shelter has at least one full-time foster coordinator. Shelters with limited resources find that re-allocating a staff position to create

a foster coordinator role is the easiest way to save more lives using the fewest resources. With a proactive, high-volume foster coordinator, the return on investment is huge.

**Recruitment of foster caregivers.** One of the most common challenges identified by shelters trying to establish a successful foster program is finding enough foster caregivers. The problem is not a lack of people willing to help. Shelters that ask for help, and ask consistently, find that there is a foster caregiver for virtually every pet in need. At Pima Animal Care Center, we mention fostering in 50 percent of our social media posts and news releases, thus creating a culture of fostering in our community. This past year, we sent more than 2,100 animals to foster homes with just one dedicated foster coordinator.

Another key to successful recruitment of foster caregivers is making it easy for folks to sign up. In years past, people wishing to become foster caregivers had to fill out a lengthy application, wait for mandatory training classes to become available, and even undergo background checks and home visits. At Pima Animal Care Center, people can either sign up online or simply come to the shelter and sign up in person, often taking home a foster pet the same day.

**Getting foster caregivers onboard.** You'll want to minimize the time between when you've recruited a new foster caregiver and when he or she takes the first pet home. For older juvenile and healthy adult animals, the process may only take a few minutes and may be accomplished with a one-on-one conversation between the new foster caregiver and a staff member or trained volunteer. For pets with medical or behavioral needs, a training session may be required.

If your organization does have required training for foster caregivers, consider putting portions of the training online, covering the most critical information in a short training session, or asking your new foster caregivers to read your foster manual in its entirety when they get home with their foster pets. Another strategy some shelters use is allowing foster caregivers to take pets home immediately, and requiring that they complete a training class within the first 30–90 days of fostering. Getting foster caregivers onboard quickly allows your community to start saving lives right away.

**Training for foster caregivers.** Special training may be a key element for caregivers who foster pets who require extra care, such as orphaned kittens and puppies or those recovering from illness or injury. However, training classes should not act as a barrier to fostering. Let's say you have a foster caregiver who wants to take home day-old kittens but has not had the necessary training. A proactive foster coordinator will offer to send that caregiver home with older kittens who are eating on their own, or even a geriatric cat or dog who needs a break from the shelter, while the caregiver waits to get bottle-feeding training. The longer people have to wait to help save lives, the less likely you will be able to retain them as foster caregivers.

Another alternative to training classes is one-on-one training for new foster caregivers. Except in special cases, most caregivers can learn what their foster pet needs in a short period of time. The foster coordinator or other staff member (or a volunteer) can spend a few minutes discussing medications, special handling instructions and emergency contact information, and then send the caregiver home with the complete manual and written instructions for care.

Remember, most foster caregivers are just like the people working in animal shelters; they love animals and want to help pets survive and thrive until they can be adopted. Make your training classes fun, interactive, focused and concise. Oh, and don't forget to bring shelter pets into the training sessions — by the end, every pet will probably have a foster home.

**Foster pet placement.** This is the area in which practices vary the most from shelter to shelter. In some shelters, the foster coordinator selects certain pets as candidates for foster care and matches them with hand-selected foster caregivers. This method is not only time-consuming, but when foster coordinators operate this way, they severely limit the number of pets sent to foster care on an annual basis, missing out on opportunities to send more pets home.

High-volume, proactive foster coordinators instead allow foster families to determine their own comfort levels, provide foster caregivers with appropriate information and training, and make almost every pet available for foster placement (except highly adoptable puppies, kittens and small dogs, who will get adopted quickly). Some shelters have signs encouraging fostering (“Available for foster: Ask how!”) on all the kennels housing adult dogs and cats. People are often more willing to take home an adult animal when they know they can spend a week or two making sure the pet is a good fit for their family. Most of these pets are eventually adopted by their foster families, and the ones who aren't come back to the shelter with tons of great information to help them find an adoptive home.

**Adoption options.** Allowing foster caregivers to adopt their foster pets, market their foster pets for adoption, meet potential adopters and complete the adoption process means that most foster pets never have to come back to the shelter. Communication after foster placement helps move pets through foster to adoption more quickly, and ensures that foster caregivers feel like they're part of the organization and know where to turn for help.

**Communication.** With every placement of a pet into a foster home, it is imperative that the foster coordinator, or an assigned staff member or volunteer, communicates regularly with the foster caregiver. At one shelter with a high-volume foster program, foster caregivers receive an email within an hour of taking home their foster pet. This email

contains information about veterinarians, vaccines and follow-up medical appointments, and emergency contacts, as well as instructions for the foster caregiver on how to get the pet adopted.

Foster caregiver questions and needs can overwhelm a foster coordinator, especially when hundreds of pets are in foster care at any given time. Maddie's Fund has developed an app called Maddie's Pet Assistant to help alleviate this stress. This app can be downloaded by foster caregivers and provides a series of surveys that guide them through a step-by-step process for fast and easy access to answers to questions about medical issues and other concerns.

In addition to using this app, shelters with limited staff resources often create internal social media groups on Facebook and other social media sites. These groups, comprising volunteers, foster caregivers and staff, may have thousands of members, and are an invaluable tool. A nervous foster caregiver with an urgent medical question (such as "What do I do when my kitten is having diarrhea?") can quickly get an informed answer from others with expertise in caring for foster pets.

In addition to having multiple avenues of communication for caregivers, successful foster programs always have a way for them to reach a knowledgeable staff person in an emergency. Serious medical and behavioral problems are rare, but they do happen and foster caregivers must get the support they need quickly. Some shelters utilize a case management approach, which means that volunteer mentors act as liaisons between foster caregivers and staff members. These volunteers serve as a consistently available point of contact and also help foster pets get adopted.

**Marketing and adoption support.** A key component to a foster program is getting foster pets adopted. When shelter staff focus all their attention on getting pets into foster homes, without thinking about getting those pets adopted, the animals may linger in foster care for weeks or months. This is especially true when foster caregivers aren't allowed or don't know how to market their foster pets for adoption.

Proactive foster coordinators send caregivers home with information and tools to get their foster pets adopted. It's now common practice to ask foster caregivers to bring their pets to scheduled adoption events at pet stores or other places in the community to help find them homes. One large shelter has a giant foster kitten event every July, just as that season's first round of tiny kittens are reaching adoption age. They adopt out hundreds of kittens this way. Another shelter holds classes for foster caregivers to teach them how to market their pets for adoption through field trips and social media. People love to show off their foster dogs by dressing them in vests proclaiming "Adopt me!" and putting adorable photos of their foster cats on Instagram.

**Written materials.** Before starting your foster program, you'll need to write a foster care manual, a document to give to foster caregivers that provides important information, including clear guidelines and expectations for program participation. Consider putting the manual on your shelter's website so foster caregivers can quickly access it when necessary. If you don't know where to start writing a manual, Austin Animal Center<sup>3</sup> has a manual that you can use as a model.

Other written materials you'll need are a foster caregiver sign-up form, which collects relevant identifying information about the foster caregiver and is completed prior to starting to foster, and a foster agreement that caregivers sign before taking home a pet.

## Fostering is the future

As communities look for more humane, cost-effective and safer housing options for shelter pets, fostering will become the norm for most animals in our care, as well as a major lifesaving program for companion animals of every size, age, species, breed and personality. By making your foster program a central part of your organization's operations, you'll save lives, conserve precious financial and personnel resources, and engage your community in a way that wasn't possible before. As you explore foster care options as a key part of your shelter, you'll very quickly see that fostering is the future of animal sheltering.

## Frequently asked questions

### ***How much does a foster program cost?***

Foster programs can be totally free, if they are managed by volunteers or already existing staff. However, we do recommend that every shelter has a dedicated foster coordinator whose only responsibility is the coordination of the foster program. Shelters around the United States are showing that one foster coordinator can manage 500 to 1,000 foster families and can place 2,500 or more shelter pets each year. When you consider the cost of shelter care, there is the potential for a huge return on investment when shelters allocate the resources for a foster coordinator. Other common program expenses such as food, formula, crates, bedding and medicines are things your shelter is already paying for or items that are frequently donated.

### ***Are foster programs safe?***

Yes. Foster care presents a safe alternative to long-term shelter housing. Today, it is no longer an acceptable practice to euthanize shelter pets simply because they haven't yet been adopted. But we also know that many cats and dogs decline medically and behaviorally over time from the stress of living in a kennel for 23 or more hours every day. Pets who entered the shelter happy and healthy may become more challenging to handle over time.

***Should we allow our volunteers to foster pets?***

One of the first things a shelter should do when starting a foster program is to automatically make every volunteer a foster caregiver. After all, who is most likely to take home the pets who are most in need of TLC and care? The volunteers who visit with, walk and give them treats every day. At Pima Animal Care Center, volunteers are permitted to foster just about any pet. Many of our dogs get to go on regular field trips and overnights, and many of our most stressed cats get month-long breaks from the kennel.

***How do we make sure foster pets get their vaccines and other follow-up care?***

Foster programs provide foster caregivers with vet appointments for vaccines and procedures such as spay or neuter surgery and post-surgery checks. Some shelters have even created a self-scheduling service for foster caregivers so that they can make their own appointments online.

***Do you send unaltered pets to foster care?***

Absolutely. Most shelters ensure that all pets are spayed or neutered prior to their permanent outcome, but unaltered pets can and should go to foster homes, if necessary. The pet could be unaltered simply because he's sick or recovering from an injury, or because he is awaiting a surgery date as the result of a backed-up surgery schedule.

***Do you let foster pets interact with children or the foster caregiver's own pets?***

It depends on three things: (1) the duration of stay in the foster home, (2) the particular animal being sent to foster care, and (3) the foster caregiver's comfort level and expertise. A foster caregiver may not allow children to handle kittens with active ringworm, whereas a caregiver with neonatal kittens may allow children to help with feeding and care. A caregiver taking home a big, boisterous dog who needs a kennel break may be totally comfortable introducing the foster dog to her own friendly puppy, but another caregiver may choose to keep the foster dog separate from the resident dog. The golden rule is all animals are individuals, as are all people who help them, so every case should be considered on an individual basis.

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**NOTES**

1. *ASPCA Position Statement on Shelter Dog Behavior Assessments*. Accessed on July 10, 2018. Available at [aspca.org/about-us/aspca-policy-and-position-statements/position-statement-shelter-dog-behavior-assessments](http://aspca.org/about-us/aspca-policy-and-position-statements/position-statement-shelter-dog-behavior-assessments).
2. A. Fehringer and N. A. Dreschel, "Stress in Shelter Dogs and the Use of Foster Care to Improve Animal Welfare," *Journal of Veterinary Behavior* 9, no. 6 (November-December, 2014): e11. Abstract available at [journalvetbehavior.com/article/S1558-7878\(14\)00164-6/abstract](http://journalvetbehavior.com/article/S1558-7878(14)00164-6/abstract).
3. *Austin Animal Center Foster Program Manual*. Available at [maddiesfund.org/assets/documents/Institute/Foster%20Program%20Manual.pdf](http://maddiesfund.org/assets/documents/Institute/Foster%20Program%20Manual.pdf).