



Training Playbook: Foster Programs

Introduction

The following guide is designed to provide an overview of foster programs and help you scale up an existing foster program or implement a new one at your agency. This program is an instrumental component to saving more animals in every community, and relevant whether your organization is a municipal agency or a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, and whether you run a brick-and-mortar shelter or a rescue group with no facility.

Well-run foster programs can exponentially increase the capacity of the community animal shelter and their capacity for care, as animals can reside in homes rather than the shelter. Shelters can be very stressful places for pets, and that stress can weaken immune systems and increase vulnerability to illness. Providing a less stressful housing option can often speed recovery, minimize behavioral deterioration and increase chances of adoption.

Organizations all over the country, from large brick-and-mortar agencies to small nonprofits, in varying regional and demographic locations, have successfully implemented robust foster programs, increasing their lifesaving exponentially. Utilizing their experiences, standard operating procedures, and best practices, the following information will help you create your own lifesaving protocol for this critical program.

Program Overview

By offering a foster program, you can reduce the number of animals in the shelter and increase successful outcomes for more animals in your community. Some of the benefits of foster programs include:

- Engagement with community members who love animals and are willing to open their homes temporarily to pets in need
- Alternative housing arrangements for pets not showing well in a shelter environment, such as reactive or shy dogs (These pets can be marketed for adoption while in their foster homes.)
- Safety and comfort for sick or injured pets in need of healing, animals who have been in the shelter for an unusually long time and pets with contagious diseases
- Prevention of the development of problematic “kennel behaviors”

Program Composition

The following describes workforce needs, internal and/or external resources, and any other additional steps that should be taken into consideration for successful program implementation:

- The first step to creating a foster program is to make sure you have a clear mission and the ability to clearly communicate to potential foster families how the foster program fits into your mission.
- Identify a key staff member or volunteer who will take the lead on overseeing the implementation and continuation of the foster program.
- Develop your standard operating procedures, including essential components such as:
 - Which animals will be prioritized for foster care, and why?
 - Who is responsible for basic supplies like food, litter, toys, etc.? Outline what you will cover and what the foster family is expected to cover.
 - What are the expectations for basic medical care (vaccinations, deworming, etc.) and where will that care be covered?
 - Who should foster caregivers contact if they have questions about their foster animals?
 - What should a foster caregiver do if an animal needs urgent medical care? Outline what constitutes an urgent situation.
 - How will you promote the animals who are in foster care, and will foster families have any responsibilities for that?
- Create a foster agreement contract that includes a comprehensive liability waiver.
- Develop a foster care manual for your foster families. The manual should include some essential information that may seem basic to you, but may not to your foster caregivers, such as:
 - How to prepare their home for the foster pet
 - What to do when they first bring the animal home
 - Routine daily care
 - Medical and emergency protocols
 - Behavior support
 - How they can help get their foster pet adopted
- To recruit foster families, create marketing materials for print and for social media, your website and other platforms.
- When recruiting, think outside the box:
 - Ask local businesses to foster an animal.
 - Convert citizens who find a stray animal into foster volunteers.

- Contact local civic groups and ask them to share information about fostering with their members.
- Provide connectivity for the foster families to your organization and to each other:
 - Utilize volunteers to routinely check in with foster caregivers.
 - Gather photos and videos from foster caregivers to promote the animals for adoption.
 - Create a closed Facebook group for foster caregivers to connect with each other.
- To retain foster families, ensure that they have a good experience so they will continue to foster. Some ways to do that:
 - Show appreciation by saying thank you. There are many other free and low-cost options to show appreciation.
 - Be transparent with foster caregivers about how long they may have a particular animal and what the animal's needs are.
 - Promptly address issues or concerns.

Sample Procedure and Program Information Documents

Now that you have a general understanding of what a foster program is, the following documents may act as templates as you implement or scale up this program at your organization. Keep in mind that there is no exact or perfect form of implementation. Using the considerations and program composition notes above, you should use the following only as guidelines or building blocks when creating your own standard operating procedures or documents (both internal and public). If you need further assistance or clarification, please reach out to your regional specialist, regional director, or the Best Friends shelter outreach team at team2025@bestfriends.org.

- [Best Friends dog foster care manual](#)
- [Best Friends cat foster care manual](#)
- [Best Friends kitten foster manual](#)
- [Generic foster SOP](#)
- [Humane Animal Control manual, Foster Programs](#)
- [Finder to Foster SOP from Pasco County Animal Services](#)
- [Foster waiver and agreement samples \(folder\)](#)
- [Maddie's Fund Foster Apprentice Program](#)
- [ASPCA Adoption Ambassadors](#)