Best Friends

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. Foster programs are an instrumental component to saving more animals in every community, and are 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 shelter and their capacity for care, as animals can reside in homes rather than the shelter. The shelter can be a very stressful place 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:

- You can create engagement with your community and showcase the lifesaving impact that community members can have on your organization.

- Fostering offers alternative housing arrangements for pets not showing well in a shelter environment, such as reactive or shy dogs, and supports the prevention of the development of problematic "kennel behaviors." These pets can be marketed for adoption while in their foster homes.

- Fostering provides safety and comfort for neonates, nursing moms, sick or injured pets in need of healing, pets with contagious diseases and animals who have been in the shelter for an extended period.

- There's decreased workload for all staff members throughout the organization.

Program Composition

The following describes workforce needs, internal and/or external resources, and 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 you can clearly communicate to potential foster families how their ability to foster impacts your mission. Next, identify a key staff member, volunteer or intern who can take the lead on development, recruitment, onboarding and engagement within the foster program. This person should have strong project management abilities, outstanding customer service skills, and the ability to maintain professionalism and confidentiality, even in the face of difficult decisions.

Create a foster agreement that includes a comprehensive liability waiver and a foster care handbook. The handbook should contain information about organizational expectations (supplies, care costs, etc.) and what foster opportunities your organization offers. It is a good idea to include foster program SOPs, organizational contact information, organizational codes of conduct, and descriptions of what constitutes a medical emergency and how to respond to different scenarios.

Creating SOPs for your foster program for staff is also important. Make sure staff know how to prioritize which animals need to go to foster care and how to communicate program needs to all potential foster families.

Develop a foster care manual for each type of fostering opportunity your organization offers (e.g., dogs, cats, kittens, nursing moms, fospice). These manuals should include some essential information that may seem obvious to you, but may not be obvious to your foster caregivers, such as:

- How to prepare their homes for foster pets
- Expectations for basic medical care (vaccinations, deworming, etc.) and where that care will be done
- What to do when they bring the animal home
- What constitutes routine daily care
- Medical and emergency protocols
- Behavior support
- How they can help get their foster pets adopted

To recruit foster volunteers, create a variety of marketing materials for print, local news channels, social media, volunteer recruiting websites (such as volunteermatch.org and linkedin.com), and your own website. To make it easy for people to sign up, create an online foster application for your website. You can use tools like Canva, TikTok, Adobe Creative Cloud and Wevideo to create new and eye-catching materials on a regular basis.

Another great recruiting idea is to host recurring open house events and invite community members to attend. Open houses can be used to inform your community about the lifesaving programs your organization offers. You can even ask volunteers to lead these events, which frees up some staff time and helps create engagement throughout the foster program.

When recruiting foster volunteers, think outside the box:

- Ask local businesses to foster an animal.

- Convert community members who find stray animals into foster volunteers.

- Contact local civic groups and ask them to share information about fostering with their members.

- Reach out to assisted-living facilities and start a bottle baby program.

- Create both short-term and long-term foster opportunities. Some people may only be able to foster for a very short period of time, but even short-term assistance can help create space in the shelter.

Provide connectivity for the foster volunteers to your organization and to each other:

- Experienced foster volunteers can serve as mentors, routinely checking in with new foster caregivers and also providing training.

- Gather photos and videos from foster caregivers to promote the animals for adoption.

- Create a closed communications group for foster caregivers to connect with each other.

- Offer regular and ongoing training sessions for all foster volunteers.

To increase retention and program buy-in, ensure that foster caregivers have a good experience with your organization. Here are some ways to do that:

- Show appreciation by saying thank you early and often. Try to communicate impact and gratitude with everything that you do. Foster volunteers need to know they are making a difference and are appreciated. Actively engage them and create a positive culture and a welcoming community.

- Be transparent with foster caregivers about all aspects of the foster program. There are potential issues with every animal placed in a foster home. Having open conversations about these possibilities before placement is a good way to discuss expectations and makes for easier conversations later on.

- Create a grievance policy and include it in your foster care handbook. You'll want to have written procedures and policies in place to help guide difficult conversations.

- Ask your foster volunteers periodically how they are feeling about their fostering experience. Consider conducting a once-a-month roundtable discussion with them so they can share with everyone what is working and what isn't. If no one wants to speak up, ask them. Don't be afraid of the answers, since that's how you know where they stand and where gaps in the program might be.

- Send surveys to foster volunteers asking for anonymous feedback on their fostering experience and programmatic changes. You can create surveys online through SurveyMonkey or other free sites.

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 noted above, you should use the following 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 strategist, regional director, or the Best Friends national shelter support team at team2025@bestfriends.org.

- Best Friends dog foster care manual
- Best Friends cat foster care manual
- Best Friends kitten foster manual
- Generic foster program SOP
- *Humane Animal Control* manual, Foster Programs
- Foster Programming (E-learning module)
- Finder to Foster SOP from Pasco County Animal Services
- Foster waiver and agreement samples (folder)
- Maddie's Fund Foster Apprentice Program
- ASPCA Adoption Ambassadors