

FOSTERING SAVES LIVES

Why and How to Be Part of the Solution for Pets in Need

By Roxanne Hawn

Common reasons people say they cannot foster pets include the ages, personalities, and needs of their own pets. The biggest reason, however, remains “I couldn’t give them up. It would break my heart.”

Truth? Giving them up gets easier the more you do it.

Susanne Kogut, president of Petco Love, a nonprofit animal welfare charity, offers a foolproof way to ensure you don’t keep foster pets. She jokes, “Foster a litter of puppies when they are really little. By the time they’re 8 weeks old, you’ll be like, ‘Oh, my gosh! Who wants them?!’”

Importance of Fostering

Using pet-owning household estimates and aggregate info on the number of adoptable pets in need, Petco Love says, “If 2% more pet parents fostered a pet, we could end preventable euthanasia in America’s shelters tomorrow.” Susanne clarifies this means new people fostering “just once a year.” She pleads, “Forget about the objections; just try it once.”

The need remains incredibly high, no matter where you live. “Every animal rescue organization is in constant need of foster homes,” Dr. Barbara Kompare, member of the Association of Shelter Veterinarians, says. “This increases their life-saving efforts and provides safe environments for animals to heal emotionally and physically. Foster homes also relieve overcrowding, which in turn decreases stress and limits exposure to disease.”

Pets who end up in even the best, most modern animal shelters and rescue organizations experience an overload of stress from confusion, strangers, noises, and smells. That stress puts both their



physical and emotional health at risk. “This can go on for quite some time while they wait,” Dr. Kompare says. “They wait to heal medically or behaviorally, wait for surgery, wait for a foster, wait for an adopter, but they wait.”

“Fostering saves lives. It’s really that simple...it opens up capacity, and it’s absolutely better for pets to be raised in a home while they’re looking for their new family.”

—Susanne Kogut

Common At-Home Setups and Supplies

Foster programs typically provide and/or pay for all supplies and veterinary care that foster pets need—making fostering as easy as possible and financially free to do, except for gas and driving costs.

Fosters should expect to receive these fostering supplies, as needed:

- Food
- Bowls
- Beds, blankets, towels
- Toys
- Leashes, collars, tags, harnesses
- Crates, baby gates, etc.
- Potty pads
- Litter and litterboxes
- Scratching posts
- Climbing structures
- Cleaning supplies
- Medications

Valerie Ann (@tinyorphanpaws on Instagram) currently fosters for Colorado Feline Foster and turned an extra bedroom with a big picture window into a foster kitty haven. She replaced the carpet with tile for easier cleaning. She ditched typical household furniture for cat-friendly items. After

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removing closet doors, she installed high shelving for extra blankets and toys. She stores food in sealed bins just outside the room. Glass French doors allow her to see the fosters anytime she walks by, but she also installed a security camera to “spy on them.”

Susanne encourages new feline fosters to start smaller, though. “If you like kittens, take a litter of kittens and put them in your bathroom. People say, ‘Oh, I can’t confine them in the bathroom.’” She counters, “They’re confined in a cage [in a shelter]. The bathroom is going to be like the Taj Mahal.”

Canine foster volunteers typically use baby gates, exercise pens, and crates as dogs and puppies settle into a new foster home. “When I first bring a dog home, because I work from home, they’re usually in the office with me with the baby gate set up,” says Melissa Freer (@nodogaboutit on Instagram). “They’re able to interact and see my dogs, but they’re not with them right away. I usually don’t leave them alone together for several weeks.”

“I really want to give dogs a chance at a new life, so this is my way to contribute.”

—Melissa Freer



Challenges With Resident Pets

A writer, Valerie Ann works at home and homeschools her teenaged daughter. The family’s dog does not go into the foster room, and many foster cats don’t come out. However, sometimes for docile kittens getting close to adoption time, she says, “We’ll wrap them in a blanket and sit with them when we watch TV. Or the ones who need a little bit more socialization, I have a cat purse, so I carry them around with me, or they sit on our laps when we do homeschooling.”

Melissa fosters for both Minnesota Sheltie Rescue and Warrior Dog Rescue. With 2 neutered male dogs at home, she avoids any potential conflict by not fostering older and intact dogs. Instead, she carefully chooses smaller and younger fosters to keep her senior Sheltie safe, explaining, “Tanner is old. He’s smaller, and I don’t want anything to happen to him.” Her 2-year-old Lab mix, Zane, enjoys playing with puppies and provides social engagement and exercise for fosters.

Veterinary Care

Dr. Kompare explains that “every rescue organization operates differently depending on their access to resources and medical services.” Some shelters and rescues include a veterinarian on

staff. Others maintain relationships with local veterinarians, who provide medical care to foster pets and bill the organization. As long as you don’t go rogue with veterinary care, you should not need to pay any foster medical expenses.

Foster volunteers often bring their foster pets for needed veterinary visits:

- Vaccinations and boosters
- Spay/neuter surgeries
- Other surgeries or dental cleanings
- Medical recheck exams

How to Get Started

Some people simply start fostering and learn on the fly. Valerie Ann, on the other hand, studied “The Kitten Lady” Hannah Shaw’s (@kittenlady on Instagram) book and videos for 18 months before she welcomed her first of now 115 total foster kittens in 6 years.

Consider asking questions like these:

- What’s the application and foster approval process like?
- Are background checks and home inspections required?
- What does the organization require for orientation, training, and/or certification?
- Who supervises fosters, and how does the organization communicate with volunteers?

- How long do foster pets typically stay?
- Are foster volunteers involved in the adoption screening and decision process?
- How does the organization keep foster pets safe onsite, in foster homes, and during transport?

If possible, interview current foster volunteers for their insights—perhaps at a fostering open house. Susanne also suggests focusing on the joy. Yes, fostering takes work, but foster pets also bring hilarity into homes.



particular mindset.” Dr. Reese says they believe, “I’m only one step on the way to a forever home with somebody else, and there’s always another animal that needs me.”

Successful foster programs, she concludes, need to provide orientation and training as well as foster support groups that instill and maintain that effective mindset. In addition, providing easy and timely access to veterinary care for foster pets with medical needs also makes volunteers “much happier.”

Involving children helps pets now and in the future.

“A lot of current fosters grew up in fostering families,” Dr. Reese says. “Families get into it because they want kids to be part of taking care of an animal and learning about empathy, but

they’re also paying it forward because organizations in the future are going to get those kids as volunteers.”

Roxanne Hawn is a journalist and author of Heart Dog: Surviving the Loss of Your Canine Soul Mate and award-winning blog, Champion of My Heart. Having fostered 40 puppies and dogs so far, her mantra is: “Love is a renewable resource. The more you give, the more you generate.”

Let’s Retire the Term “FOSTER FAIL”

When foster volunteers sometimes choose to adopt a foster pet, how does the word “fail” apply? It doesn’t.

Rather than I-told-you-so vibes, celebrate the lifelong love connection by calling them “foster-to-forever” pets.

Successful Fosters

Based on a 2023 survey of both foster programs and foster volunteers, Dr. Laura Reese, a professor at Michigan State University, is writing a book about fostering. The research reveals insights about successful fosters.

Most fosters only foster and do not volunteer onsite for organizations with facilities. People with dogs tend to foster dogs or puppies. People with cats tend to foster cats or kittens. Within those species splits, many foster volunteers specialize further:

- Only adult pets or only young ones
- Mommas and litters
- Litters/underage pets
- Newborn/orphaned pets who require bottle-feeding
- Pets with medical needs
- Pets with emotional needs

Dr. Reese says, “It seems like the most successful fosters who are able to let them go and are satisfied with their fostering role are the ones who do a lot of self-care.”

Successful fosters also develop “a



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