

It Takes A Community
Starting a Foster Program



TOMPKINS COUNTY
SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO ANIMALS



Why Start A Foster Program?

At some point in time nearly every animal shelter feels the pinch of not having enough space. It seems that no matter how large the facility, there is always one more mouth to feed. And some humane organizations have no shelter or holding facility at all, yet want to get involved in rescue, rehabilitation, and rehoming. A volunteer foster program can be an ideal low-cost way to greatly increase the number of lives a group can save while at the same time providing a wonderful opportunity for community members to volunteer.



Not only does a foster program maximize the number of animals rescued, it allows an organization to care for animals who would be difficult to care for in a shelter environment—orphaned or feral kittens, animals recovering from major surgery, or dogs needing one-on-one behavior rehabilitation. For animals who may need a break from the shelter environment, foster care provides a comfortable home setting that keeps them happy and healthy.

*The Tompkins County
SPCA has over 150
animals in foster care at
any given time.*

And, of course, a foster program directly involves people in your lifesaving mission and shows the community that no-kill is a joint effort.

The keys to building a successful foster program are actually quite simple: lay the groundwork, recruit, train, and keep track.

Which Animals?

Foster programs aren't just for kittens. As long as you can recruit an appropriate foster parent, nearly any animal you have can benefit from foster care:

- Orphaned kittens and puppies
- Feral kittens
- Under-aged, self-feeding kittens and puppies (4-8 weeks old)
- Mother cat or dog with nursing kittens or puppies
- Animals recovering from injury or illness (may need medication)
- Shy or fearful animals who need socialization
- Healthy adult animals waiting for space at the shelter, or who need a break from the shelter
- Reptiles and other exotics

Legal Issues

All businesses deal with risk management and liability issues, so don't let these concerns stop you from starting a foster program. The key is to minimize risk through proper precautions and training.

- ❑ Make sure your organization's insurance covers off-site volunteers and animals. If necessary, update your coverage.
- ❑ All dogs should be temperament tested before going to foster homes.
- ❑ Develop a "hold harmless agreement" that all volunteers and foster parents must sign. (See sample.)
- ❑ Develop a foster care agreement that all foster parents sign acknowledging their understanding of the rules, regulations and expectations of your foster care program. (See sample.)
- ❑ Require foster parents to attend an orientation, and provide them with written information on what to expect and how to properly care for the animals they are fostering.



Guidelines and Procedures

In order to keep your program running smoothly, you will want to develop some guidelines and procedures for foster parents and staff to follow. These rules do not need to be complex or address every single possible scenario. Start by covering the basics, and as your program grows be sure to update and adjust them as necessary. In fact, staff should review guidelines on a regular basis to be sure that foster parents are receiving the most up-to-date information, and that your written protocols adequately address the program's needs.

Next consider what your organization will provide for foster parents to do their job and what you will require of them. Different organizations have different standards, but as a rule, the more you are able to provide or pay for, the more foster parents you will be able to recruit.

Some issues you will want to consider:

- ❑ Food/kitten formula
- ❑ Litter/litter box
- ❑ Medications
- ❑ Incidentals like treats and toys
- ❑ Emergency care
- ❑ Adoption of fostered pets

Some organizations require foster parents to pay for everything the animal needs during their stay in foster care. Others organizations provide everything foster parents will need. Whatever you decide, be sure to reflect this in your written guidelines. At the same time, be flexible and willing to accommodate special cases. For example, if you have a large dog who will need foster care for a long time, consider providing the foster parent with some dog food, a dog bed, or a gift certificate to a pet supply store (donated hopefully!). For orphaned kitten volunteers, perhaps you can give out a "starter kit" of a bottle or two and some kitten formula.



Other issues to consider: will you require foster parents to have adopters visit their homes? Drive animals to adoption events? Make appointments to return animals ready for adoption, or just drop them off? Again, there is a balance between flexibility for the foster parent and available shelter time and resources.

Make provisions for medical emergencies. Be clear what you expect foster parents to do should a problem arise. Do you have an emergency 24-hour number for them to call? A specific veterinarian they should go to if a problem comes up after hours? Spell these things out ahead of time in your written materials, as well as in the volunteer orientation meeting.

Luke Finds Love

When Luke (pictured above) came to the TC SPCA as a stray, he was so timid and traumatized that he wouldn't even walk. Two evaluations by a Cornell University veterinarian who specializes in behavior medicine confirmed that Luke was not aggressive, just terribly afraid of the world. Cornell's Department of Behavior Medicine prescribed a treatment protocol to help Luke regain trust in people.

The one-on-one care he needed was provided in a loving foster home. Today, Luke is a happy, healthy, eager-to-please pup who, thanks to the work of his foster family, recently found his forever home.

At the TC SPCA, our foster parent volunteers provide food, litter, and other basics. We provide medical care and medications. Foster parents with animals ready to be adopted can choose to drive them to adoption events or off-site adoption locations, or simply bring them back to the shelter at any time. Volunteers can bring back their charges before they are ready for adoption for any reason, and we will find a new foster home.

We allow foster parents to adopt their own foster pets. While we encourage them to show the animals to their friends and family, foster parents cannot authorize these adoptions—they must take place through the shelter.

Develop Your System

It sounds obvious, but a system to keep track of foster animals and their caregivers is often overlooked. It does not have to be complex, just allow staff easy access to the information they need. At the TC SPCA we use a simple spreadsheet

in Excel that lists foster parents by name, email, and phone number. It includes information on which types of animals they are willing to foster and which animals they are currently fostering. It also has space for any other relevant information, such as whether they have any special needs pets in the home, if they will be unavailable for fostering for a specific period of time, if they have any special skills (dog training, feral cat taming, etc.), and any other information we might need.

The TC SPCA recently saluted two amazing volunteers who together fostered 135 cats and kittens last year. We call them our "Satellite Shelter!"

When an animal comes into the shelter and is identified as needing foster care, TC SPCA staff members immediately begin calling foster parents on the network. We also keep in touch via a volunteer email list.

Once an animal is in foster care, you can update your database to reflect when the animal is scheduled to come back, or any other changes in animal or foster parent status.

Even though it might sound like a lot to do to get ready to start a foster program, don't let it put you off! Your forms, recruiting strategies and volunteer orientation session don't have to look beautiful or be perfect when you start. You do not need to have every decision made. The important thing is to get started—the sooner the better.

Calling All Recruits

Many people want to volunteer directly with animals but lack the time or inclination to do so in a shelter. Others may want to adopt a pet, but cannot. Some may want to experience the joys of a companion animal in the home, but are not ready for the long-term commitment of adoption. And dogs, cats, and rabbits can provide a welcome relief from loneliness for seniors.



Keep all these points in mind as tools for recruiting foster parents. For although caring for foster pets can be challenging, it is also deeply rewarding, and you want to let potential volunteers know that they too have something to gain. Foster parenting can be much more flexible than other volunteer jobs that require people to show up for a specific shift, during limited times of the day, for a committed length of time. Promote your foster program as a flexible, fun, rewarding, and special volunteer job.

Many successful foster programs allow their foster volunteers a large measure of flexibility. For example, a family may be available to foster a litter of kittens for two weeks. Great—give them some six-week-old kittens. Or you can give them a litter of

four-week-old kittens who you can place in another foster home after two weeks. Being flexible may mean more work for your staff, but it will also make it more attractive for people to foster for you—thus saving more lives.

So how do you find potential foster parents? Advertise, advertise, advertise. Do everything you can to make sure people in your community know that you need foster parents—and that they have something to gain by volunteering, too.

Here are some easy, low-cost ways to spread the word:

- ❑ Ask your current volunteers to foster, and get them to encourage friends and family to foster.
- ❑ Create attractive flyers, and have them available in your lobby, at adoption outreach sites, and events. Ask volunteers to take flyers and hand them out and post them around town. (See samples.)



- ❑ Place ads in the paper. Many weekly papers have free online and print classified ads. Don't be afraid to ask for donated or discounted ads.
 - ❑ Have a prominent mention of your foster program on your website. Be sure to include adorable pictures!
 - ❑ Write a press release right before kitten season pleading for foster parent volunteers.
- ❑ Staff members at veterinary offices can make ideal foster parents—give them a call.
 - ❑ Make contact and keep in touch with feral cat caregivers in your community. They are often on the front lines of kitten season, and can make great foster parents. To help recruit, you might offer free adult spay/neuter for their ferals in exchange for fostering kittens.

Ask, ask, and ask again. Foster programs are usually relatively small (in inverse proportion to the need of course!), but remember that a small handful of people can accomplish great things.

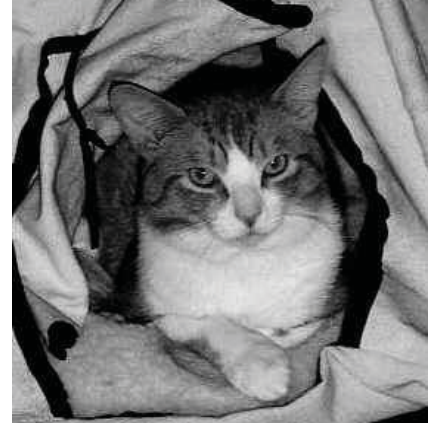
Teach And They Will Come

It can be particularly difficult to recruit foster parents for orphaned kittens. And during the busy “kitten season” most shelters are certain to have more than their share of these little gems. Without a neo-natal foster parent network, it can be extremely difficult for a shelter to save orphans. One effective way to recruit foster parents is to hold classes on neo-natal kitten care and kitten development.

Have a veterinarian, veterinary assistant/technician, experienced foster parent, or staff member lead the class, demonstrating feeding and elimination techniques, health assessment, and the stages of development. If possible, have kittens of various ages right there in the class with you—kittens who need foster homes!

Advertise the class at pet supply stores, veterinary offices (consider personally inviting staff), and in the community. Be sure to invite feral cat caregivers. The class need not be high-tech or fancy. You can cover the basics in one hour. Ask attendees to apply as foster parents or to attend an orientation to learn more.

Feel free to remove our logo and put your group's name on any TC SPCA material to use as a guide for the class or for handouts. (See samples.)



Retention

As with many animal care jobs, burnout can be a problem for foster parents. Yet another reason to recruit as many as you can so the load is lighter on each! Your foster parents are doing a wonderful thing for you, and more importantly, for the

animals. Be sure to tell them how much you appreciate it. Profile foster parents in your newsletter, send thank you notes, and offer "benefits" to foster parents such as allowing them to adopt their charges for free. Or surprise them with some movie tickets for a night out (of course, ask the theater to donate the tickets. And while you're at it, ask theater staff if they'd like to sign up as foster parents!)

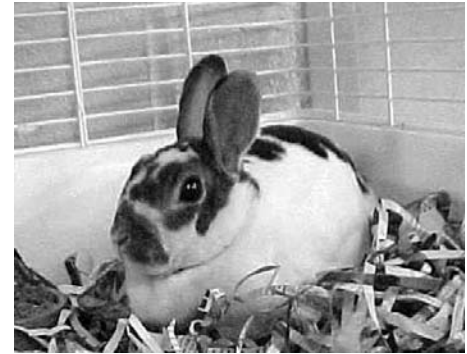
Phoenix Rises
Phoenix (above) came to the SPCA after he was hit by a car. After several days in intensive care, he was sent to a foster home with a guarded prognosis for four months of recuperation. Would he pull through? Would he find a loving home? Like the mythical bird for which he is named, Phoenix rose to the occasion--he recovered fully and was adopted by the foster family that couldn't part with him.

Once you have people interested in fostering, you need to move quickly—consider fast-tracking the volunteer process for this group. Give them the forms they need to fill out, and any informational materials you would like them to have. Staff should move quickly to review and process foster parent applications so you can start training them, and more important—you can start placing animals in foster care.

Training

Once you have started recruiting and have new volunteers lined up, begin training immediately. To save time, you might want to schedule regular orientation sessions that potential foster volunteers can take at their convenience. If you can't hold regular orientations, staff can meet with foster parents in small groups or one-on-one.

At the TC SPCA, once a person has filled out the foster application, a volunteer foster coordinator immediately reviews it, then schedules the person for a 2-hour orientation session (which we hold weekly.) After the orientation, volunteers fill out all their paperwork and an experienced foster parent does an in-home visit that evening. Then the new foster parent is ready to go.



The Orientation

Here are some basic ideas you might want to cover in your orientation session:

- ❑ Introduce the staff member(s) or volunteer(s) who will be the foster program coordinator.
- ❑ Give a tour of your shelter, if you have one.
- ❑ Describe your mission and services.
- ❑ Explain why foster parents are vital to saving lives in your community.
- ❑ Tell some success stories about specific animals, and talk about animals needing foster right now—get people inspired!
- ❑ Go over the guidelines and procedures of your program. Pay special attention to things like what to do if an animal needs after hours medical care, how your adoption process will work, and what foster parents are expected to provide.
- ❑ Go over general animal care information, along with handouts on the same.
- ❑ Waivers and forms.

Continuing Education & Training

Make sure foster parents know that they can and should call you with questions. It is a good idea to have a specific staff member, an experienced foster parent or a volunteer foster coordinator assigned to interact with new foster parents if possible. This helps to form a relationship that makes everyone more comfortable. Once you have highly experienced foster parents, consider asking them to be mentors to new recruits.

If you offer classes on pet behavior and other animal care issues, be sure to invite current foster parents, and *always* use such classes as an opportunity to recruit new foster parents.

Occasionally something is bound to go wrong: a foster parent won't return an animal at the time or date you requested, or they will go to a vet you did not authorize. Use situations like these as training opportunities. Email lists can also be a quick and easy way to communicate changes in procedures, updates on animals, and other issues that occasionally arise.

Expand Your Horizons

As your program grows, you will find that things you previously thought impossible suddenly become possible. What to do with the two adorable FeLV+ kittens like Thelma and Louise (below) until you can find a forever home? Foster! The dog who was hit by a car and had to have a leg amputated? Foster! Litter after litter of orphaned kittens? Foster!

Dogs with behavior problems are often considered difficult to rehabilitate in the shelter environment. For example, dogs who fear men or who need desensitization to loud noises may have a hard time in the shelter, but in foster, they can receive the tender one-on-one care they need. Dogs seized on cruelty cases may need to be held for long periods of time. Without a foster program, they would have to make due with daily walks. But once you start a foster program, these dogs can have a chance to spend time in a loving home environment.

And a foster program can even help your spay/neuter program. The TC SPCA's policy requires every animal to be altered before being placed in their new home. Once an animal is officially adopted, it may take a couple of days to schedule the surgery, and foster homes come in handy—keeping space open in the shelter, and making sure no un-altered animal is adopted.

As your foster parent network becomes more experienced your program can benefit even more—foster parents can take on more difficult cases as well as mentoring your new volunteers.

No-Kill takes a community. And a volunteer foster program is one of the easiest, low-cost, rewarding ways for a humane organization to work hand in hand with the community to save animals.



Resources

The Tompkins County SPCA has an extensive array of fact sheets and materials available on our website. These can be used as-is or modified for your community.

General Information

- ❑ TC SPCA 2001 Annual Report
- ❑ A Shelter Guide to Saving Dogs, Cats, and Other Animals
- ❑ Volunteer Applications
- ❑ Foster Parent Applications
- ❑ Why Adopt from The TC SPCA?
- ❑ How to Find a New Home for Your Pet
- ❑ Spay/Neuter—Why? Where? How Much?

Dog Behavior & Care

- ❑ Pet Lover's Guide to Your New Dog
- ❑ What Dogs Want
- ❑ Off-Leash Dog Parks
- ❑ Kong is King
- ❑ Ten Steps to Doggy Bliss
- ❑ Choke and Shock Collars
- ❑ Puppy Development
- ❑ House Training
- ❑ Barking
- ❑ Helping the Shy or Fearful Dog

Cat Behavior & Care

- ❑ Pet Lover's Guide to Your New Cat
- ❑ Raising Kittens
- ❑ Coping with Cat Allergies
- ❑ Upper Respiratory Infection

Small Pets

- ❑ Pet Lover's Guide to Your New Rabbit
- ❑ Pet Lover's Guide to Your New Mouse, Rat, or Guinea Pig



Wildlife

- ❑ Living With Wildlife
- ❑ Humane Bird Deterrents
- ❑ Humane Mice Deterrents
- ❑ Humane Raccoon and Skunk Deterrents
- ❑ Humane Woodchuck Deterrents
- ❑ Give Wildlife a Brake!
- ❑ Humane Cat Deterrents

Feral Cats

- ❑ Trap, Neuter & Return
- ❑ Care & Feeding of Feral Cats
- ❑ Feral Cats & Public Safety
- ❑ Humane Trapping
- ❑ Feral Cat Medical Issues
- ❑ Post-Surgery Recovery Care
- ❑ Raising Feral Kittens
- ❑ Feral Cat Socialization
- ❑ Feral Cat Relocation
- ❑ Resolving Neighbor Conflicts
- ❑ Feral Cats in Winter