



Foster-Centric Programming

Table of Contents

Foster-Centric Sheltering Overview.....	2
Troubleshooting Common Challenges.....	2
Difficulty Recruiting Fosters.....	2
Length of Stay in Foster is Too Long.....	2
Foster Coordinator is Overworked.....	3
Difficulty Allocating Sufficient Staff to Foster Care.....	3
Personnel Options for Foster Care Management.....	3
One Full-Time Staff Member.....	3
Multiple Full-Time Staff Members.....	3
Part-Time Staff.....	3
Volunteers.....	3
Repurposed Existing Staff.....	4
Sample Organizational Chart.....	4
Foster Application Template.....	4
Emergency Foster Plea Templates.....	5
Data Collection for Foster Care.....	5
Behavior Foster Programming.....	6
Overview.....	6
What Problem is Behavior Foster Programming Trying to Solve?.....	6
Benefits of Behavior Foster Programming.....	6
Before You Begin.....	7
Getting Started.....	7
Technology Uses.....	9
Personnel Uses.....	10
Success Story.....	10
Supporting Resources.....	11



Foster-Centric Sheltering Overview

Historically, foster care was considered a niche program, serving primarily orphaned kittens and puppies as well as pets with medical needs that could not be adequately cared for in the shelter. Foster programs, including placing pets in foster homes, supporting foster caregivers and caring for pets' medical and behavioral needs, were managed almost entirely by the foster coordinator.

Before the internet and social media was used widely by shelters and rescues, prospective adopters' main avenue for meeting adoptable pets was through visiting them in-person at the shelter. Most fostered pets were required to return to the shelter as soon as they became available for adoption in order to be matched with prospective adopters on the adoption floor.

[Foster-centric sheltering](#) makes foster care the standard of care for most every pet in the shelter and aims to place 50% or more of animals in foster homes within hours or days of their arrival. Foster care is just as important as adoption in a foster-centric organization. Recruiting foster caregivers, placing pets in foster care and supporting their fosters is the responsibility of the whole shelter. A comprehensive, year-round [foster recruitment plan](#) is in place, utilizing multiple strategies including local news, social media and word-of-mouth. A foster-centric shelter posts adoptable pets on their website and on social media, and most adopters find their new pets online or via word of mouth. There are efficient processes in place to market pets and complete the adoption process directly from foster homes.

In a [foster-centric](#) organization, the majority of pets who enter the shelter system are placed in foster homes within hours or days of arrival, and most foster pets are adopted directly from foster homes. In the foster-centric model, foster care is prioritized as much as adoption, and its success is the responsibility of the entire organization.

Troubleshooting Common Challenges

Difficulty Recruiting Fosters

Until recently, foster care has been viewed as a niche program that was useful for a small subset of pets. Due to the small number of pets placed in foster homes, the seasonal nature of pets' births and lack of time, most organizations have only recruited fosters when absolutely necessary. Placing the majority of an organization's pets in foster homes requires a much more comprehensive approach to foster recruitment. Organizations must create a year-round [foster recruitment plan](#) that includes multiple strategies for extending the invitation to foster to all segments of their communities.

Length of Stay in Foster is Too Long

Since foster pets have traditionally come back to the shelter's adoption floor for adoption, many organizations haven't needed to create an efficient system for getting marketing material and information from foster caregivers or marketing pets from foster homes. Foster-centric organizations need to create a [foster marketing system](#) that works for them. Since foster caregivers will get to know pets better in homes, the possibilities for great marketing are endless.



Foster Coordinator is Overworked

One of the most common challenges to building a foster-centric shelter is in getting the entire organization and its staff on board. Traditionally, foster care has been managed by the foster coordinator, who is responsible for just about every foster-related task. Leadership need to understand that having one foster coordinator manage more than half of their intake in foster homes is not feasible. A foster-centric shelter requires the *entire* organization to see foster care as a priority and a part of their job, just like with adoptions. Creating an organizational culture that values fostering is essential.

Difficulty Allocating Sufficient Staff to Foster Care

Once the foster-centric model is fully in place, the decrease in pets at the shelter will decrease the number of staff needed to care for them. Some of these staff can be reallocated to foster care. However, this may be challenging initially. When an organization is just beginning to place more of its pets in foster, the number of additional pets placed in foster homes may be too small to warrant the need for the reallocation of in-shelter staff to foster care. Shelters and rescues may need to onboard volunteers to help with program management, assign staff such as adoption counselors roles in the foster process or temporarily hire additional staff in the interim.

Personnel Options for Foster Care Management

One Full-Time Staff Member

Many shelters and rescues have one or more full-time, paid staff. This can be very helpful because their lack of competing responsibilities allows them to be more accessible during work hours and emergencies.

Multiple Full-Time Staff Members

Organizations that do high-volume foster care often have multiple full-time staff devoted to it. Each staff member usually specializes in one species or at-risk population, but this isn't required. For example:

- Organization A has a dog foster coordinator and a cat foster coordinator.
- Organization B has 4 foster coordinators total. Each specializes in one of the following areas: kittens, adult cats, general dog foster and behavioral foster for dogs.

Part-Time Staff

Part-time staff can be used as additional support for foster care or as managers for other staff or volunteers.

Volunteers

While having paid staff to manage foster care can be extraordinarily helpful, shelters and rescues should not let lack of funding for foster staff prevent them from starting or growing their foster programs. Some high-volume foster programs are managed entirely by volunteers, and many others have built in volunteer support for foster care management.

- [Sample Job Description](#)



HUMAN ANIMAL SUPPORT SERVICES

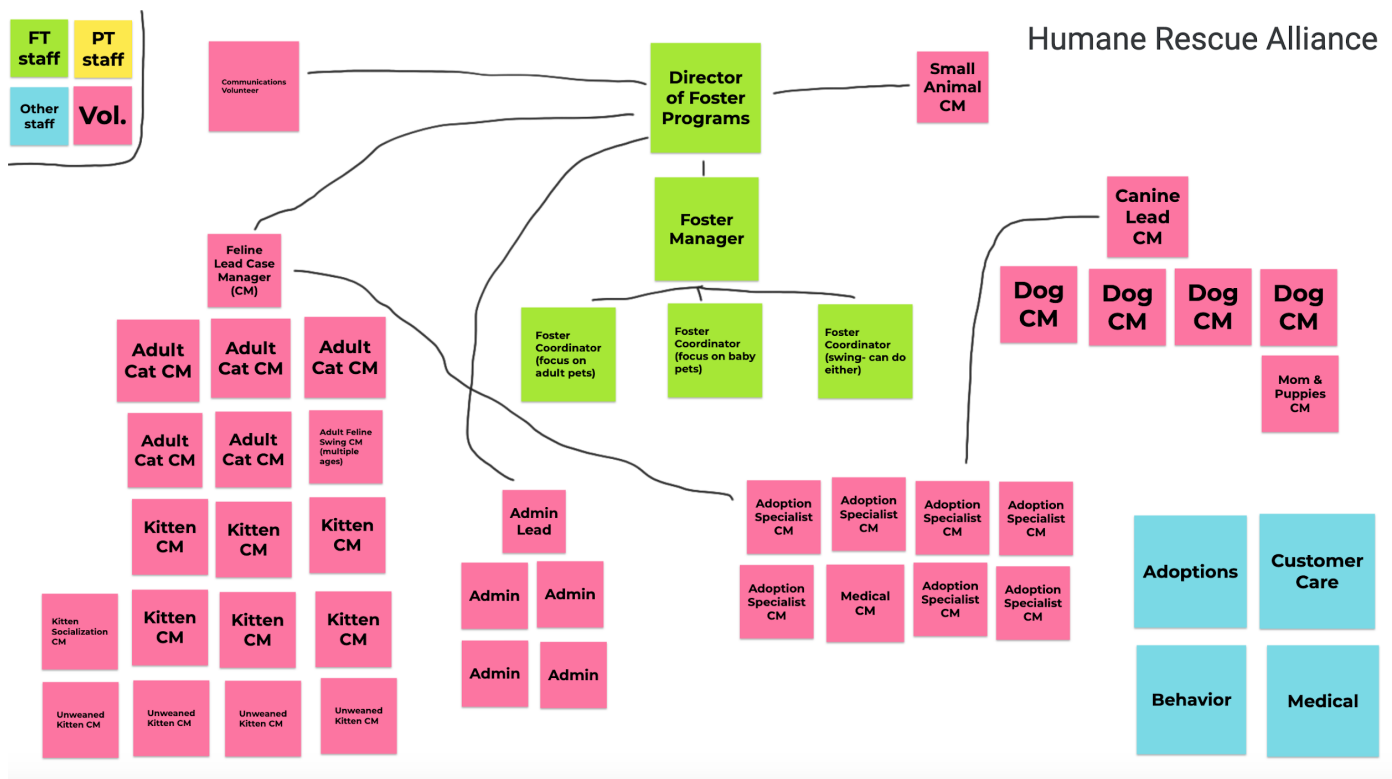
Repurposed Existing Staff

Foster-related tasks such as checking fosters out in the shelter or rescue’s software system can be made the responsibility of other staff members. For example:

- Adoption counselors can counsel foster caregivers, place pets in homes, and/or check foster pets out to caregivers.
- Behavioral foster support can be provided by behavior staff.
- Medical staff provide veterinary care.

Sample Organizational Chart

- Foster organizational chart [video overview](#) from Humane Rescue Alliance
- Foster organizational chart [video overview](#) for DeKalb County Animal Shelter, part of LifeLine Animal Project



Foster Application Template

The [foster care application template](#) may be used as a base to create a resource that fits your organization’s unique set up and needs.



Emergency Foster Plea Templates

The [emergency foster plea templates](#) highlight language that may be adjusted to fit the needs of your organization's emergency situation to help more pets be connected to foster parents. These sample templates include natural disasters and population crisis.

Data Collection for Foster Care

Set measurable goals for foster care and track data associated with these goals. Using a data-driven approach helps organizations identify gaps in service and look for ways to build and improve.

1. Pets placed in foster
 - a. Total number of individual pets fostered (monthly and yearly)
 - i. Break down by species, age, condition, reason for foster care and length of stay
 - b. Total number of pet placements into foster (monthly and yearly)
 - i. One pet may be placed in several foster homes over time
 - ii. Break down by species, age, condition, reason for foster care and length of stay
2. Pets' outcomes and the type of pet
 - a. Total outcomes of all pets the shelter takes in (monthly and yearly)
 - b. Total outcomes of pets fostered (monthly and yearly)
 - i. Break down by species, age, condition, reason for foster care
 1. If one group has an especially low save rate, what can you do to change it? Send to foster sooner? Give fosters more training?
3. Foster recruitment and retention
 - a. Number of new fosters who sign up (monthly and yearly)
 - b. Where are new fosters finding out about your need for foster caregivers?
 - i. Make this a required question on your foster sign-up form, and use this data to fine-tune your foster recruitment efforts.
 - c. What parts of your community do your fosters live in and how diverse is your foster base? How can you reach those you're not currently reaching so your foster base is as diverse as your community?
 - d. Number of active foster caregivers (yearly)
 - e. Number of fosters who leave the organization (yearly)
 - f. Feedback from foster caregivers (yearly)
 - i. Consider using [FAST 15](#), a free assessment tool
4. See the [Foster Data Collection Spreadsheet Template](#) more!



Behavior Foster Programming

Overview

A behavior foster program is an extension of your general foster care program. Pets who exhibit behavioral challenges in the shelter or other settings often benefit from foster care placement. Animals may exhibit challenging behaviors that are resolved by placing the animal into a foster home; however, some challenging behaviors persist. It is often difficult to distinguish between these prior to placement.

A candidate for behavior fostering presents a behavioral or training challenge but, to the best of the organization's knowledge, is not a public safety concern. Foster caregivers are expected to actively manage and/or train their behavior foster. Foster caregiver compliance and objective (unbiased) feedback about the animal is important so that more specific pathway planning can be made for the animal. It's equally important that the organization has behavior instructions that are easy to access, understand, and adhere to [least intrusive minimally aversive \(LIMA\)](#) principles.

What Problem is Behavior Foster Programming Trying to Solve?

Even in the best circumstances, animal shelters are stressful places, making pets susceptible to behavioral decline. Experience and research shows that some stress-associated behaviors may resolve in a home environment. On the flip side, because a shelter is not a setting that replicates real life, some behaviors don't present until the pet is in a home environment. Animals with behavior concerns are at a higher risk for longer lengths of stay and euthanasia. A longer length of in-shelter stay increases the likelihood of animals experiencing [fear, anxiety, stress or frustration \(behavioral deterioration\)](#) and/or new behavior concerns, and the cycle continues.

Benefits of Behavior Foster Programming

- Save money
- Build community engagement
- Grow volunteer support
- Improve morale within shelter
- Increase marketing and media engagement
- Increase fundraising
- Reduce the number of animals housed in the shelter
- Decrease length of stay in the shelter
- Learn more about animals in your care
- Increase adoption and/or rescue placement
- Promote diversity, equity and inclusion
- Support human health and wellness
- Move animals through the shelter system faster



Caring for animals with behavioral issues in foster homes may lower overall length of stay, as behavioral decline from longer shelter stays would be all but eliminated. Overall well-being may increase as most animals who would be stressed in the shelter are now awaiting adoption in foster homes. Shelters will have much more comprehensive information on animals' behaviors in a variety of different contexts which can lead to more individualized care and better informed decision making.

Before You Begin

When thinking about starting a behavior foster program, it is best to ensure that you have a solid general foster care program to build on. Please refer to the [HASS Resource: The Foster-Centric Model](#), which contains information about how to develop a general foster care program.

Your organization should have clear standard operating procedures and guidelines about pathway planning, risk assessment, and outcome and decision making before starting a behavior foster program.

Getting Started

The following is a list of the basic steps for expanding an existing foster program to include behavior fosters. For more detailed guidance on how to start a general foster care program, check out [Realistic Job Preview: Starting a Foster Program](#).

- Create or update your budget for behavior foster care and decide what you need the most.
 - Example from [Alley Cat Allies Foster Toolkit](#) to help you budget, pages 21-22.
- Use this document to obtain buy-in from your leadership team about creating a behavior foster program.
- Set goals for the behavior foster program:
 - Set overarching programmatic vision, objectives and goals.
 - Create a system to identify metrics, to collect data to measure progress to goals, with a timeline for achieving those goals.
 - Example: The number of foster caregivers and animals in the program
- Create Standard Operating Procedures for the behavior foster program:
 - Decide who will oversee the behavior foster program, the reporting structure, and cross-departmental allocation of work.
 - Identify the behavior concerns that your organization is comfortable sending to foster care and can support.
 - Start by placing animals with mild to moderate behavior concerns as you develop and grow your program (e.g., dogs experiencing behavioral deterioration, cats with litter box issues, fearful animals)



HUMAN ANIMAL SUPPORT SERVICES

- The placement of the pet should be determined by the pet's needs. For example, a highly dog-social pup who is fearful of new people but has no other behavioral issues may benefit from being fostered by someone who has a confident, friendly dog who can show them the ropes.
- Create a job description(s) for behavior foster caregivers and various roles.
- Update or create documents, such as a [behavioral addendum](#) for your foster care agreement to ensure increased liability coverage.
- Review your process for foster caregivers to get in touch with the appropriate persons during a behavioral [emergency, including when and how](#).
- Create or revise your [comprehensive foster recruitment plan](#).
 - Create profiles for animals with behavior concerns who need foster caregivers.
 - Note: If you have superstar behavior foster caregivers, highlight them and their successes. Marketing pets who are in behavioral foster homes can greatly help decrease length of stay, as well as help recruit others to get involved. It shows that behavior foster animals are just regular animals, and are also fun. Also, if you can move these pets through your foster homes more quickly, they can foster another (but do avoid burnout by giving them breaks, as needed).
- Train foster caregivers, staff and volunteers (organization-wide) on the program:
 - Ensure that barriers to becoming a behavioral foster are low and not arbitrary. For example, a foster for a dog who displays jumpy/mouthy behavior in the shelter may need to learn how to support the dog as they settle into a home, but they don't necessarily need training about supporting fearful dogs. Staff need to learn that while the foster home for this dog might need more training skills, they don't necessarily need to go to a foster home who doesn't have other dogs.
 - Upgrade your online [foster caregiver orientation](#).
 - Collect, develop and widely share training resources (including video) that are easily accessible to foster caregivers and other people in your organization who may not have extensive or evidence-based behavior knowledge.
 - a. Example: Behavior modification, in-home training, safe handling
 - b. Check out these specific behavior plans from the Center for Shelter Dogs for [fear of people, jumpy/mouthy behavior and food aggression](#).
 - Educate foster caregivers about expectations/procedures for being a behavior foster.
 - a. Example: Public safety protocols, local ordinances, and guidance for foster caregivers on marketing pets, meeting with potential adopters and completing adoptions from home.
- Develop a system to provide support to foster caregivers
 - Caregivers can receive support from: behavior staff, foster coordinator and team, volunteer foster mentors, other foster caregivers, volunteers, local trainers, the community (GoFundMe), etc. Think about the full scope of support.



HUMAN ANIMAL SUPPORT SERVICES

- Create [Foster Teams](#), a group of people who work together to coordinate and implement all aspects of the care, training, marketing, etc. In addition to the link above, you can also check out this [foster teams YouTube video](#).
- Develop a hierarchy of support, such as behavior foster mentors.
- Create a plan and processes to retrieve behavior information and observations about behavior animals in foster care.
 - Example: [Animal Return Google Form](#) to gather pet behavior info from foster caregivers.
 - Explore new programs like [FIT Camp](#): modeled off of a doggie daycare, foster caregivers drop dogs off at the shelter for the day to receive enrichment, training, and adoption opportunities. The dogs will then continue to spend the nights and any other day they are not scheduled for FIT Camp in the foster's home. Potential adopters get to see them in action, the shelter learns more about the behaviors, and the foster pet is pooped at the end of day.
- Develop a recognition and retention plan for your behavior fosters, to celebrate their successes and provide emotional support.
- Start small, solicit feedback, assess, and expand the program over time. The [Fast 15 is a free foster program assessment tool](#) created by the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

Technology Uses

The following are some tools other organizations have found helpful in automating tasks and workflow. More general guidance can be found in the [Realistic Job Preview: Starting a Foster Program](#) and the beginning sections of this resource.

- Use your animal management software, Excel or Google Sheets to track foster program data on placements, new behavior fosters, foster turnover, etc.
- Provide online orientation, training, and continuing education in pet behavior.
 - Example: [Pima Animal Care Center's Online Dog Foster Orientation](#)
 - Example: [Maddie's University](#) course catalog
 - Example: [GoodPup](#) or other apps that provide support and training
- Create an online location where your foster caregivers can find the information they need such as the foster manual, education on specific topics and information on the adoption process. Ideally this could live on your organization's website or social media page/groups.
 - Example: [Austin Pets Alive! Dog Foster Resources Webpage](#)
 - Example: [Pima County Foster Resources Webpage](#)
- Consider using a [Google Voice number](#) or texting as a way to connect about lower level emergencies.



- Utilize [Zoom](#) and other tele-conference and live video options for anything and everything (e.g., remote learning, consultations, connecting with trainers, first-round adoption intros, etc.)

Personnel Uses

While it may be advantageous to hire one or more full-time staff to manage the behavior foster care placements at your organization, it's possible to manage the program with volunteers and/or part-time staff.

Getting started:

- Estimate the number of work hours needed. The number of weekly work hours required to implement and manage the behavior foster program will be dependent on the size and types of intake, community support, resource availability, and ultimately the number of behavior fosters your organization aims to place.
- Develop a comprehensive foster organizational (and management) chart that involves staff at all levels and is managed using every available work capacity resource:
 - Full-time, paid staff
 - Part-time, paid staff
 - Reallocated staff who assist with specific activities
 - Volunteers, trained and committed
 - Volunteers, new or relatively untrained
- Create [job descriptions](#) for staff and/or volunteers.
 - Most organizations use the same role description for general foster caregivers as those who foster pets with behavioral issues, with specific tweaks and behavior directives.

Since the majority of pets will be cared for in foster homes as they await adoption, the focus of behavioral staff will shift from strictly working with pets in the shelter to supporting and training foster caregivers and providing community-based behavior support.

Success Story

Albus was picked up as a stray and brought to his city's shelter in 2018. Unfortunately, his past was unknown, but anyone could tell that he was unique, with lots of behavior quirks. Potential foster caregivers and adopters kept passing him by since he wasn't like a "normal" dog. He was aloof and hard to read in shelter and only had limited notes about his behavior in a home... until Taylor & Jennifer! These two took a chance on this boy and we are so grateful for them. He's in a foster home and finally knows what it's like to be loved and feel safe. Next stop, adoption.



Supporting Resources

Sample Documents for Behavior Foster Programs:

- [Managing Big Dogs: The New Horizon](#) (conference recording)
- [Innovative Fostering: Saving More Dogs with Behavioral Challenges](#) (webcast)
- [Behavioral Foster at LifeLine](#) from Michelle Harmon
- [Utilizing Foster Rounds to Improve Animal Care](#)
- [Austin Animal Center: Starting a Medium/ Large Adult Dog Foster Program](#)

List of Resources In This Document:

- [Maddie's Fund: Super Charge Your Foster Program with These 7 Guiding Principles](#)
- [IIABC: LIMA: Hierarchy of Procedures for Humane and Effective Practice](#)
- [About Fear Free Shelters](#)
- [Realistic Job Preview: Starting a Foster Program](#)
- [Alley Cat Allies: Saving Cats and Kittens with a Foster Care Program](#)
- [Dr. Ian Dunbar's Dog Bite Scale](#)
- [Austin Pets Alive! Dog Foster Behavior Agreement Addendum](#)
- [Comprehensive Foster Recruitment Plan](#)
- [LifeLine Animal Project: Dog Return \(Google\) Form from Foster Care](#)
- [Pima Animal Care Center's Online Dog Foster Orientation](#)
- [Austin Pets Alive! Dog Foster Resources Webpage](#)
- [Pima County Foster Resources Webpage](#)
- [Austin Pets Alive! Dog Foster Program Plea Board How-To Video \(Trello\)](#)
- [Austin Pets Alive! Dogs Needing Foster Webpage](#)
- [Levels for Emergencies for Foster Caregivers FlowChart](#)