



No More Homeless Pets Forum  
October 6, 2003

## Foster Care

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**Foster care: how can you develop a program that really works?** [Jenn Clayton](#) of the Utah Animal Advocacy Foundation will answer your questions about how to start or run a successful foster care program.

### Introduction from Jenn Clayton:

Are you interested in starting a foster home program? Or perhaps you already have a foster home program that is not quite what you had hoped it would be?

Running a foster home program can be extremely challenging, but a well-run program can make all the difference for a struggling rescue group or shelter.

Foster homes can provide much-needed care for very young, sick, or injured animals; socialization for shy or fear-aggressive animals; and basic training for animals that need it. But perhaps most importantly, foster homes can provide rescue groups and shelters with invaluable information about a foster pet's temperament and training, making it easier to match the animal with an appropriate adoptive home.

This week, I'll answer your questions about starting and running a successful foster home program. We'll talk about how to recruit, screen, train, manage, and retain volunteer foster homes.



Foster kitten

### Questions

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### Screening for fosters

#### Question from Janet:

Our shelter started a new foster program less than 3 months ago, so we're still new at it. We have one woman who is fostering 2 kittens with URI. I had her fill out all the appropriate paperwork and did a home visit. Everything seemed fine. Her pets were very well cared for, although she does live in a small house with 4 cats and a dog. Now I'm unable to find out what's going on with the kittens. I've called her twice to find out how the kittens are doing and ask when she's going to return them. My messages have not been returned. I felt very good about her as a foster parent, since she worked as a vet tech for 8 years in the community. Now I'm not sure what to think. Any suggestions?

#### Response from Jenn:

It sounds like you took reasonable steps to ensure that this person would make a good foster home. Unfortunately, no screening process is 100%. I am not sure what is going on with this woman and the two kittens, but it sounds like she has a history in the community and hopefully she'll return your calls before too long. If not, you may need to send a registered letter or simply show up on her doorstep. Hopefully, everything will work out okay.

As you have already discovered, screening potential foster homes can be difficult. Here are a couple of ideas that you might find helpful...

Make sure your foster home application is thorough. Your foster home application should look very much like your adoption application. A certain percentage of your foster homes are ultimately going to want to adopt the animal they

are fostering, so make sure they are approved ahead of time. Never give a foster animal to someone that you would not feel comfortable adopting to. If your organization requires that dogs be kept indoors or that cats not be declawed, make sure that these issues are addressed in your foster home application. That way you'll avoid the awkward situation of having to tell a foster home that they cannot adopt the animal they are fostering.

Ask about past fostering experience. If a potential foster home reports having fostered for other agencies, be sure to contact representatives from these agencies to find out whether their experiences with this foster home were positive.

Create some sort of Foster Home Agreement, or legal contract, outlining your expectations. Be sure to include your expectations relating to the care of the animal, transfer of the animal to other persons or agencies, return of the animal to your organization, expenses associated with the animal, etc. Many problems can be avoided simply by making sure that foster homes understand what is (and is not) expected of them.

Do a home visit. Home visits are a great way to get a feel for a foster home. Be sure to make note of the condition of other animals in the home, fenced yards, appropriate isolation areas for sick fosters, etc. A satisfactory home visit is not going to guarantee a good foster home, but it is a very important step in the process.

Create a training program. Requiring that new foster homes attend a training program will give you the opportunity to teach important aspects of animal care including issues related to quarantine and infectious disease, orphaned animal care, vaccination schedules, cleaning procedures, basic behavioral training, etc. In addition to training foster homes on issues of animal care make sure to include a section on your organization's policies and procedures. Again, this is simply another way to make sure that foster homes understand what is expected of them.

And finally, realize that no screening procedure is going to be perfect. You are going to run into foster homes like the woman with the two kittens. Do what you need to do to get the kittens back and then decide whether or not this foster home is worth keeping. Don't let one bad experience discourage you from developing your foster home program. Hopefully, for every bad experience you have you will have many, many good.

## Should fosters have to be a member of the organization they are fostering for?

### Question from Carol:

Our organization does not have a Shelter at all, so we must rely on foster homes for any animals we take in. My question: should a foster caregiver be required to be a member of the organization they are fostering for?

### Response from Jenn:

How much should you require of volunteer foster homes above and beyond the actual fostering of animals? I think that this is often a topic of controversy for foster home programs. We have had this discussion in our organization several times, not only about requiring fees, but also about requiring lengthy training programs. One could make the argument that foster volunteers do enough, simply by opening their homes to the animals in your program. But one could also make the argument that requiring a membership fee is a good way to help screen out people who are not all that committed to the cause. I think that the answer probably lies somewhere in the middle. Requiring some sort of financial support from foster homes, whether in the form of a membership fee or a foster home certification fee, is potentially a good way to help ensure a certain level of commitment from your foster homes. The challenge is making sure that, in the process, your foster homes do not feel under-appreciated.

One way to achieve this balance would be to simply adjust your membership fees for foster homes just as you would for a student or senior citizen. A reduced membership fee would communicate appreciation for your foster homes, while requiring a certain level of commitment. Whether you decide to require fees or not, make sure that you take steps to acknowledge your volunteer foster homes - send cards, throw parties, provide foster homes with adoption updates on the animals they foster. It is okay to require financial support from your foster homes, but be prepared to adjust your show of appreciation accordingly.

## Recruiting new fosters

### Question from Norma:

I volunteer as a foster home for our rescue group that runs the animal shelter here. One of the main reasons foster homes are needed is overcrowding at the shelter, a small, old-fashioned building formerly run as a "dog pound" by the city.

My questions are about getting more foster homes. There are very few of us who do this work, and although I have written articles about fostering for the newspaper and have posted at the Senior Center for older people who might enjoy the company of an older animal, we are still only the few of us who always do it. Right now I have 15 fosters here. I converted a small bedroom into a room for the fosters, and 13 of the present bunch are kittens, otherwise it would be impossible. Any ideas you have about recruiting would be welcomed.

### Response from Jenn:

It sounds like you've made a great start by contacting your local paper and by posting at the Senior Center. Here are a few more ideas to help you recruit more foster homes...

Create a brochure telling people about your foster home program. Make sure you have a "Q & A" section that addresses commonly asked questions about fostering. Be sure to answer questions about what kinds of animals need fostering and for how long, who pays for the food, litter, and vet care, who is responsible for finding permanent adoptive homes, etc. Make it as easy as possible for people to indicate their interest in fostering, perhaps by making the last page of the brochure a response form that can be torn off and mailed to you. And of course, make sure to include lots of cute pictures of foster pets if possible!

Go where the "animal people" are. Ask veterinary hospitals, grooming shops, dog training facilities, pet supply stores, etc. to display your brochures. Create a flyer telling people about your foster home program and post it wherever there are bulletin boards in your community. Be sure to have your contact information repeated along the bottom of the flyer so that people can tear it off and take it with them.

Recruit your adopters! Your adoption database is a potential gold mine for foster homes. Chances are if a person has passed your adoption screening process, they will probably pass your foster home screening process. Be sure to include foster home recruiting information in every adoption packet you send out.

Use the media. Try placing a short classified advertisement in the pet section of your local newspaper, or create a PSA for local radio stations. Any time your shelter or rescue group gets any media attention or air time be sure to mention your foster home program.

And finally, make sure that you have a staff member or volunteer that is committed to spending time each week managing your foster home program. Nothing is more frustrating to a potential volunteer than being ignored. When people start sending in your response forms and calling about your flyers, make sure that someone is prepared to respond to them in a timely manner.

Hang in there and don't get frustrated. Building a team of reliable, responsible foster homes can be a slow process, but it will be worth the work in the long run.

## Should fosters pay for supplies and how many should they house at one time?

### Question from Pat:

We are just starting to build on our current foster home base. Is it reasonable to require the foster home to cover the cost of food, litter, supplies? Are fosters expected to board animals at their cost if they go out of town during their agreed-upon weeks of foster care? Is it wise to set a low limit on the number of animals in foster care early on, to see how many we can reasonably keep track of with a very small staff?

### Response from Jenn:

Okay, let's take each of these questions one at a time:

"Is it reasonable to require the foster home to cover the cost of food, litter, supplies?"

Yes. The key is making sure that foster homes know ahead of time what is expected of them. I have found that most foster homes, especially those that foster on a small scale, are more than happy to provide the basics. That said, I certainly feel that it is appropriate for foster home programs to offer supplies whenever possible. Be honest with your foster homes. If you have lots of donated food and litter, be sure to let foster homes know that they are welcome to it. If your foster home program is struggling financially and you are unable to provide supplies, be sure to communicate this as well - I think you'll be surprised at how accommodating foster homes can be when they feel like they know what is going on.

"Are fosters expected to board animals at their cost if they go out of town during their agreed-upon weeks of foster care?"

No. In my opinion, this is not a reasonable expectation for your volunteer foster homes. Not to mention, most foster animals are not good candidates for boarding. Boarding facilities are often unwilling to board foster animals, many of whom have an unknown health history and/or are in foster care because they are too young, too old, or too sick to be adopted. A foster home needing to go out of town is one of many scenarios that will necessitate your having available foster homes at all times. You are always going to have foster homes that need a break, foster homes that have emergencies, and foster homes that simply don't feel they are a good match for the animal they are fostering. Don't expect that your foster homes understand how hard your job is. I can't count the number of times that I have had a foster home call me on July 3rd to let me know they will be going out of town for the July 4th holiday. Try finding a space in a boarding facility the day before a holiday weekend! In our organization, we decided to address this recurring problem by developing a team of emergency, short-term foster homes. We found that we had a number of volunteers that we rarely used as foster homes because they were only able/willing to foster for a very short period of time (1 to 5 days). So we got these volunteers together and gave them the title of Emergency Foster Care Provider. This program has successfully alleviated much of the stress associated with common foster home "emergencies."

"Is it wise to set a low limit on the number of animals in foster care early on?"

Absolutely, positively, YES! If I had to pick the single most important lesson I have learned while running various foster home programs, it would be that it is imperative to keep your numbers realistic and appropriate for the size of your organization. Consider the following:

Running a foster home program is a lot of work. For every animal you have in foster care you'll likely have routine and emergency veterinary care to schedule, adoption event and transportation issues to deal with, behavior and training questions to answer, etc. Make sure you are going to have the staff to respond to and nurture foster homes appropriately.

Your foster home program should be proportional in size to your adoption program. Ultimately, you can only save as many animals as you can find homes for. So, if your adoption program consistently adopts out 20-30 animals per month, there is no reason to have 100 animals in foster care. "Stockpiling" animals, as we call it, is hard on foster homes, hard on program coordinators, and hard on foster animals who, after 8 months in a particular foster home, think that they have found their happily-ever-after.

Foster home programs can be expensive. Puppies are going to break with parvo and kitties are going to develop upper respiratory infections. Make sure the size of your foster home program is such that you are going to be able to consistently provide the animals in your program with whatever level of care your organization is committed to providing.

Sit down with your staff early in the development of your foster home program and discuss these issues. Set your goals high, but make sure that your staff, your finances, and your adoption program are prepared to keep pace with your growing foster home program.

## Determining the roles of fosters and foster coordinator

### Question from Mary:

I am the foster program coordinator for a local no-kill shelter. The program has been in place for several years now and I just took it over recently with no training or knowledge on how to run it. I've searched the web for information on how to run a foster program with no luck. So, how do I go about managing a successful program? What is my role and what is expected of me by my foster parents?

### Response from Jenn:

As with any established program, your foster program probably has aspects that are working great and others that aren't working so well. No need to reinvent the wheel. Your first step should be to determine what's working and what's not. Talk to your foster homes. Ask them what they like and don't like about fostering for your organization. If they are no longer interested in fostering, find out why. Consider sending out a "Report Card" asking foster homes to rate different aspects of the program and to share their ideas about how the program could be improved.

Next, define your idea of "success." In other words, what do you want your foster home program to accomplish? Ask yourself the following questions...

Do you need short-term foster homes that simply provide housing and basic care for the animals in your program? Or do you need longer-term foster homes that are trained to provide nursing care, behavior modification, and basic obedience training? You'll want to work on developing a foster home training program that will meet the specific needs of your organization.

How many foster homes do you want to ultimately have? Keep in mind that your foster home program should be proportional in size to your adoption program. No need to have more animals in foster care than your adoption program can handle. In fact, "stockpiling" animals in foster homes for lengthy periods of time is a really good way to burn out foster homes and foster program coordinators, so keep your numbers realistic.

Do you need foster homes that are willing and able to help with more than just housing the animals in your program? Would you like them to transport animals to and from veterinary appointments and adoption events? Are you able to provide foster homes with food, litter, and vet care, or do you need your foster homes to provide these things? In developing your program, be very specific about your expectations. You can avoid a lot of frustration in the long run by knowing what you want from your foster homes and communicating your expectations effectively.

I can't emphasize enough how important it is to set realistic goals and to manage your program accordingly. Your chances of running a "successful" program are going to be dramatically increased if your definition of success is realistic and appropriate for the size of your organization.

As for your question regarding what your foster homes expect of you - ask them! Since your program was up and running before you became the program coordinator, your foster homes probably already have expectations related to the previous coordinator. Talk openly with your foster homes about what they expect from you. Some of these expectations may be reasonable and others may not. You'll have to address the expectations that already exist, but eventually, it will be up to you to let your foster homes know what they can expect of you.

## Providing temporary foster care for owned animals

### Question from Melissa:

I am working on developing a foster care network for animals of domestic violence victims, so that when women and children leave their violent homes to enter safe shelters their pets have somewhere safe to go. Any information specifically on this topic would be helpful.

### Response from Jenn:

We commonly receive requests to provide temporary foster care for animals that are owned. These requests come from people in domestic violence shelters, homeless shelters, hospitals, etc. We have made a lot of mistakes in this area and learned a few things along the way. I will share with you some of the problems we have encountered in hopes that you can learn from our mistakes. Here's a brief list of what I've learned about providing foster care for animals that are owned:

Protect your organization and your foster homes. Providing foster care for animals that are owned carries with it issues of liability that do not necessarily exist when caring for animals that belong to your organization. Make sure that you have a waiver that releases your organization and your foster volunteers from any liability associated with the animal. We once agreed to provide temporary care for a young kitten that subsequently died of feline distemper (panleukopenia) while in foster care.

Even though the kitten died within 4 days of arriving at her foster home (she obviously was exposed to the virus prior to arrival), her owners accused us of having killed the kitten. Make sure that your waiver is thorough and addresses who is responsible for providing veterinary care should the animal become sick or injured. If possible, have your waiver reviewed by an attorney that is experienced in animal law.

Limit the information you give an owner about the location of their animal. Owners are going to want to know how their animals are doing and often will request to talk to the foster care provider. I highly recommend not allowing owners to contact foster homes directly. The foster home coordinator should act as the contact person for both owner and foster home. In the situation mentioned earlier, the husband of the woman who owned the kitten repeatedly contacted the foster care provider calling her an "animal killer" and threatening to bring suit against her. Luckily, everything worked out okay in this situation, but it certainly resulted in some changes to our program!

Be prepared to keep the animal indefinitely. For whatever reasons, people do not always return for their pets. Do not commit to care for an animal that you are not prepared to take into your adoption program permanently. I recommend setting specific time limits for owners. Your waiver should state that, at the end of an agreed-upon time limit, legal ownership of the animal will be transferred to your organization. These limits do not have to be absolute and can be adjusted when necessary, but having an agreed-upon time limit will make it possible for you to legally place an animal for adoption, should its owner not return for it.

Be creative in your search for financial support. You are not going to be limited to traditional animal welfare funding sources for a program like the one you are describing. There is a lot of money out there for women's issues. Talk to your local Women's Resource Center, domestic violence shelters, rape crisis centers, etc. Ask them where their funding comes from and what government agencies and/or private foundations they would recommend that you approach to help you fund your program.

Good luck! If your experience is anything like ours has been, you'll have plenty of challenges along the way. But hang in there! A successful foster care program for animals of domestic violence victims will be a great thing for the animals, and for your community.

## Finding fosters for special needs animals

### Question from a member:

Our most desperate need for foster homes is for animals that need more socialization and training. We often get in a lot of cruelty cases that need that extra TLC but we are concerned about how to make sure that we are not putting our fosters in jeopardy. Many of these animals are coming from unknown backgrounds. How do we ensure against liability for our shelter, keep our fosters safe, and train them appropriately to handle these animals while in their care?

### Response from Jenn:

I think yours is a common dilemma. The animals that tend to need foster care the most - animals that are very young, sick, or unsocialized - also tend to be the most difficult to find qualified foster care for. There are two ways to obtain highly trained foster homes - recruit foster homes that already have a high degree of training, or develop a training program to teach foster homes the skills they need to handle animals appropriately.

There are several good places to solicit foster homes that already have training and experience. Consider creating a brochure or flyer designed specifically to recruit animal professionals - veterinary technicians, canine behaviorists, trainers, etc. While you will still need to provide some training for these foster homes regarding your organization's policies and procedures, most will already be very comfortable handling unsocialized and fear-aggressive animals.

We have a number of trainers and veterinary technicians that foster for us, and their contributions are invaluable to our organization.

In addition to soliciting animal care professionals as foster homes, you will also want to develop a training program for less experienced foster homes. If you are not sure where to start, ask experts in your community - veterinarians, technicians, dog trainers, behaviorists, experienced foster homes, etc. - to help you develop and present your training program. You may even want to eventually have a certification process for foster homes so that volunteers can become "certified" by your organization to provide various types of specialized care.

Our training program consists of two different levels. The first is required for all foster homes and provides basic information on issues related to health, basic obedience training, and policies and procedures. The second more advanced level of training is optional and provides detailed information on orphaned animal care, behavior modification and training, socialization, nursing care, etc. To further ensure the safety of our volunteer foster homes, our staff is trained to conduct temperament testing on every animal that we take into our program. This testing provides us with important information about an animal's temperament and training, and allows foster homes to make informed decisions about the animals they foster.

Of course, no testing procedure is going to be 100% and no training program is going to guarantee absolute safety for your foster care providers, so make sure you take steps to protect your organization from potential legal problems. You can greatly limit your liability by requiring foster homes to sign a legal agreement or waiver stating that they understand and accept the risks and responsibilities associated with fostering.

## How involved are fosters in determining your policies and screening?

### Question from a member:

Our group is all fosters; we don't have a shelter. How involved do you let your fosters get with decision making in terms of screening policies and whether to do same day adoptions or not? Because they are so involved with their fosters we feel that we should allow them a say in policies and flexibility in deciding where to place their fosters but we have been having a problem recently with people not paying attention to rules and just doing whatever they want. We feel like we need to start enforcing policies but don't want to upset our fosters. Any thoughts?

### Response from Jenn:

I agree with you that it is important to allow foster homes a say in the placement of their foster animals. As a foster parent myself, I would be horrified to find out that my foster animal was going to a home that I disapproved of. Foster homes can provide valuable insight into the personality and training of their foster animals, and their input should be weighed heavily in the adoption process.

That said your rules and regulations are also very important. While it is not appropriate to send animals to adoptive homes that foster parents disapprove of, it is also not appropriate to allow animals to be adopted to homes that you or your organization feel uncomfortable with. Remember that, in the long run, it is the organization that is making the lifetime commitment to the animals you adopt out. It is going to be you, not necessarily your foster home, who is going to have to deal with the animal when it is returned in 6 months because the adoption was a bad match.

We have successfully dealt with this issue by breaking our adoption process into two distinct steps. First, the adoption application is completed by the adopter and reviewed by a staff member (or highly trained adoption volunteer) who also conducts a thorough interview. If, for any reason, we do not feel comfortable with the adoption, the application is denied before it is ever officially reviewed by the foster home. If the application is approved by our staff, the volunteer foster home is asked to review the application and talk with the person interested in adopting. If the foster home approves of the adoptive home, then the adoption process is completed. If not, we politely explain to the adopter that she has been approved to adopt from our organization, but that we do not feel she is a good match for that particular animal. Both our staff and our volunteer foster homes have responded well to this system.

## Should fosters do follow up adoption calls?

### Question from Deb:

We recently had a terrible situation with a foster mom and an adopter. Our group usually allows the foster people to do follow up phone calls to check on their adopted fosters. This foster mom went "over the edge" and virtually harassed the adopter to the point that they were threatening legal action on harassment. They ultimately returned the kitten. This never happened before, but do you think we're making a mistake by allowing this? We know fosters like to know how their kitties are doing, so we try to accommodate them.

### Response from Jenn:

We made this same mistake early in our foster home program. It seemed harmless enough to ask foster homes to do the follow-up calls on their foster animals, but we had problems similar to the one you have described. We found that some of our foster homes, while being absolutely wonderful at the role of foster care provider, did not always represent our organization in a manner that was professional and appropriate. We have since developed a system for

follow-up calls that seems to be working well and still involves foster homes in the follow-up process.

The key to this follow-up system is a simple form that consists of two main sections. The first section is completed by the adoption staff when an animal is adopted and asks for background information on the adopter and the adopted pet. It also asks for "special concerns at the time of adoption." Here, the foster home is asked to write down any specific questions or concerns that they would like to have addressed during the follow-up process.

This form is then given to one of our volunteers that are trained to conduct follow-up calls. The form provides the follow-up caller with all the background information she needs regarding the adopted animal, including the specific concerns mentioned by the foster home. The second section of the form provides the caller with a list of standardized questions to ask the adopter. The caller is asked to provide a detailed record of her conversation with the adopter, and to note any questions or concerns that still remain at the close of the call.

Once complete, this follow-up form is filed permanently with the animal's adoption paperwork and a copy of the form is provided to the foster home. This system allows us to involve our foster homes in the follow-up process while maintaining a certain level of professionalism with our adopters. It has improved the effectiveness and consistency of our follow-up program and has been responded to favorably by our foster volunteers.

## Should foster animals be kept separate from your own animals?

### Question from Pat:

Part 1: How important is keeping foster animals apart from owned, if the animals are all healthy? Is this necessary for psychological as well as medical reasons?

Part 2: Is it reasonable to ask people to volunteer at your shelter a set number of hours before fostering in order to get to know them and for them to truly understand issues such as Parvo and URI. Do you think this is reasonable considering some people come forward to foster because they need to do something from home, i.e. stay-at-home moms, retirees?

### Response from Jenn:

Part 1 - We require that every animal be quarantined for a minimum of 10 days - kept at home and not allowed to visit parks, pet supply stores, groomers, etc. This 10-day period allows time for illnesses to become apparent and for vaccines to take effect. We encourage foster homes to keep animals completely isolated from personal pets during the quarantine period whenever possible. Unfortunately, it is not always realistic to expect foster homes to be able to keep foster animals, especially adult dogs, completely separate from other animals in the home at all times. We do our best to educate foster homes on issues of disease transmission and trust them to make responsible decisions about how and when they allow their foster animals to interact with other animals in the home. We do, of course, insist that foster homes isolate animals that are sick or injured, or that have specific behavioral issues associated with other animals. In these instances we try to make sure that we match special needs animals with foster homes that are able and willing to provide adequate care and isolation.

Part 2 - I think it is absolutely appropriate to ask people to volunteer at your shelter as part of your foster home training program. It is a great way for volunteers to familiarize themselves with your organization, your staff, your adoption program, etc. It is also a good way to teach volunteers the basics of how to recognize and treat common health problems, and how to isolate and clean effectively. Our organization does not have a shelter, but I often ask foster homes to accompany me on rescue trips to local shelters and humane societies. I am amazed at how many volunteers are completely unfamiliar with the "shelter environment".

Spending time in the shelter seems to help volunteers better understand the scope of the pet overpopulation problem and get a better feel for how the foster home program fits into the big picture. I have found that most volunteers leave their shelter experience with a renewed commitment to the program and to the cause of animal welfare.

## Can you fire a foster?

### Question from a member:

There is one lady who has been a foster since before I started working at our shelter and when we went to drop off some puppies to foster to her, I was appalled at the conditions of her house. It was filthy and she was overcrowded with way too many of her own animals. So I have three questions: have you ever "fired" a foster home, how did you do it without causing a scene, and how often do you do home visits to your fosters to make sure that things are still in good condition and that you would want them as a foster?

### Response from Jenn:

Our organization does not currently require formal home visits beyond the initial foster home screening process, but we do try to make sure that we make several informal visits throughout the year (while picking up foster animals, dropping off thank you cards, etc.) This system has worked well for us thus far.

I can only think of one instance when I actually had to "fire" a foster home. This particular volunteer repeatedly

disregarded our policies by giving her foster animals away. She insisted in each case that the animal had gone to a great home, and we did eventually convince two of the three homes to complete adoption paperwork. But we had made it very clear to this foster home on several occasions that she was not to hand an animal over to anyone until that person had completed the adoption process. After the third occurrence, it was clear that she had no intention of following our policies. Initially, I just stopped calling her for help. But when she called to find out what was going on, I decided it was important that I tell her my concerns. I told her that we had some serious problems with her disregard for our policies. I also mentioned that she had signed a contract that stated, "I will not give the animal I am fostering to another person or agency without first receiving permission from UAAF." I explained to her that we were very serious about enforcing these policies. She replied by saying that she understood, but that she was no longer interested in fostering for our organization.

Here are a few tips for dealing with your current situation...

First, talk with other relevant staff members to make sure that you are really willing to lose this person as a foster home. Decide whether you think she is ultimately helping or hurting your program. Discuss the specifics of your concerns. Are you most concerned with the total number of animals in the home? Or are you more concerned with issues of cleanliness and the overall conditions in which the animals are being kept? Decide whether you think this a unique situation, or whether there are issues here that need to be addressed by creating policies that will apply to all your foster homes. If you choose to create new policies in response to this situation, have these policies ready when you approach your foster home about your concerns.

If you ultimately decide that you no longer want this person fostering for your organization, try to be direct. Chances are, this person already knows that she has a few too many animals. Tell her that you are concerned that she is overwhelmed and you do not feel comfortable asking her to take on any additional foster animals. Suggest to her that she consider helping your organization in other ways - volunteering at the shelter, helping at adoption events, etc. Dealing with "delinquent" foster homes is one of the toughest parts of the job. Try to stay focused on the big picture and do whatever you need to do to protect the animals in your program. In the long run, you'll be glad you did.

## When foster homes become attached to the animals

### Question from a member:

Do you have any thoughts about what to do when a foster home gets attached to foster animals and don't want to let them go? We've had a couple of foster homes that have adopted their foster dogs and now don't have room to foster anymore. We obviously are happy the dog found a good home, but don't want to lose foster homes either.

### Response from Jenn:

I'm afraid I don't have an easy answer for this one. We, too, occasionally lose foster homes to this scenario. I do, however, think there are a few things you can do to make it easier for your foster homes to part with their foster pets...

Don't "stockpile" animals. We talked about this a little bit in one of the earlier questions from this week. Make sure your foster home program is run efficiently so that foster animals don't stay in foster homes any longer than absolutely necessary. Don't keep significantly more animals in your foster home program than your adoption program can handle. The longer an animal stays in a foster care, the more difficult it is going to be for the foster home give the animal up.

Involve your foster homes in the rescue process. Take your foster homes with you to the shelter and let them help you select the animals for your program. A trip to the shelter can really help give some perspective and serve as a reminder that parting with a current foster animal means potentially saving another life.

Involve your foster homes in the adoption process. Make it clear to your foster homes that you value their input and that you are interested in having them participate in the adoption process. Foster homes often feel more comfortable parting with a foster animal when they feel like they have some degree of control over where the animal ends up.

Also, make sure you provide foster homes with adoption updates whenever possible. When you get those great letters, stories, or pictures from adopters, be sure to share them with your foster homes. Remind them that there ARE great homes out there.

Give foster homes the opportunity to talk with other foster homes. There is no question that fostering is stressful. We all know how easy it is to become attached to a foster animal. Make sure your foster homes know they are not alone. Consider holding informal meetings every so often to allow foster homes a chance to talk to each other and share their experiences. Sometimes a little peer pressure is all it takes to help convince a foster home that it is okay to part with their foster animal.

## How to avoid having an animal in a foster for too long

### Question from a member:

We are an all foster home group and have difficulty getting foster homes because we require people to foster until the animal gets adopted. This could be a week or a year depending on the animal. Because we can't guarantee, many

people don't want to commit to such a possibly long time. How do you handle this since you can't predict when an animal will get adopted?

**Response from Jenn:**

Don't automatically discount a potential foster home simply because they are not willing to commit to fostering an animal indefinitely. I have to laugh when I look back at some of our early foster home applications. Some of our best, most dedicated foster homes initially marked on their application that they were only interested in fostering for a week at a time. These same people now foster several animals at a time and always keep their foster animals until they are adopted. I think it can sometimes be intimidating for people who are unfamiliar with your organization to blindly commit to fostering an animal indefinitely. Give these people a chance to get to know your foster home program. Many of them may be willing to make much bigger time commitments once they better understand their role in your rescue program.

During your screening process, ask potential foster homes how long they feel they could commit to caring for a foster pet. If they are only able to commit to fostering for a couple of weeks, use them for your younger, healthier, more adoptable animals. While it's true that you can't always predict how long you will have an animal in foster care, there are animals that are likely to place quicker than others. Do your best to match these animals with your shorter-term foster homes. Even foster homes that are only willing to foster for a few days at a time can be valuable to your organization. They can, for example, provide emergency, short-term foster care for last-minute returns, or provide much-needed breaks for other foster homes.

Ultimately, of course, you will have to be prepared to move an animal to another foster home if it overstays its welcome. This is always going to be a risk - even foster homes that commit to fostering an animal indefinitely can run into unforeseeable problems. But I think you'll be surprised that most foster homes will be flexible in situations where an animal might need to stay a little longer than initially planned.

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