HASS Playbook: Intake-to-Placement
Foster Programming

Foster-Centric Sheltering Overview

Historically, foster care was considered a niche program, serving primarily orphaned kittens and puppies or pets with medical needs that could not be adequately cared for in the shelter. Foster programs were managed almost entirely by the foster coordinator, including everything from foster placement, foster support, and pets' medical and behavioral needs.

Before the internet and social media were used widely by shelters and rescues, prospective adopters' main avenue for meeting adoptable pets was 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 to be matched with prospective adopters on the adoption floor.

Foster-centric sheltering makes foster care the standard for almost 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 are the responsibilities 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 its website and social media, and most adopters find their new pets online or via word of mouth. There are efficient processes to market pets and complete the adoption process directly from foster homes.

In a foster-centric organization, most 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 entire organization's responsibility.

Troubleshooting Common Challenges

Difficulty Recruiting Fosters
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. Creating a year-round foster recruitment plan with diverse strategies to reach the entire community can improve the recruitment of fosters for an organization.

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 materials and information from foster caregivers. 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.

The Foster Coordinator is Overworked

One of the most common challenges to building a foster-centric shelter is getting the entire organization and its staff on board. Traditionally, foster care has been managed by the foster coordinator, who is responsible for every foster-related task, which isn't feasible with the goal of having half of a shelter's intake in foster homes. 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 as the needs of the organization slowly shift. It can take time to begin placing more pets in foster, so shelters and rescues may need volunteer support or temporary staffing for program management until some animal care staff can be shifted into foster roles.

Personnel Options for Foster Care Management

One Full-Time Staff Member

Many shelters and rescues have one or more full-time, paid staff members, making them more accessible during work hours and emergencies without competing job responsibilities.

Multiple Full-Time Staff Members

Often, organizations with high-volume foster care 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 four foster coordinators in total. Each specializes in one of the following areas: kittens, adult cats, general dog foster, and behavioral foster for dogs.
- SAMPLE Dog Foster Placement Coordinator Job Description

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 beneficial, shelters and rescues should not let a 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.

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 can provide veterinary care or counseling.

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
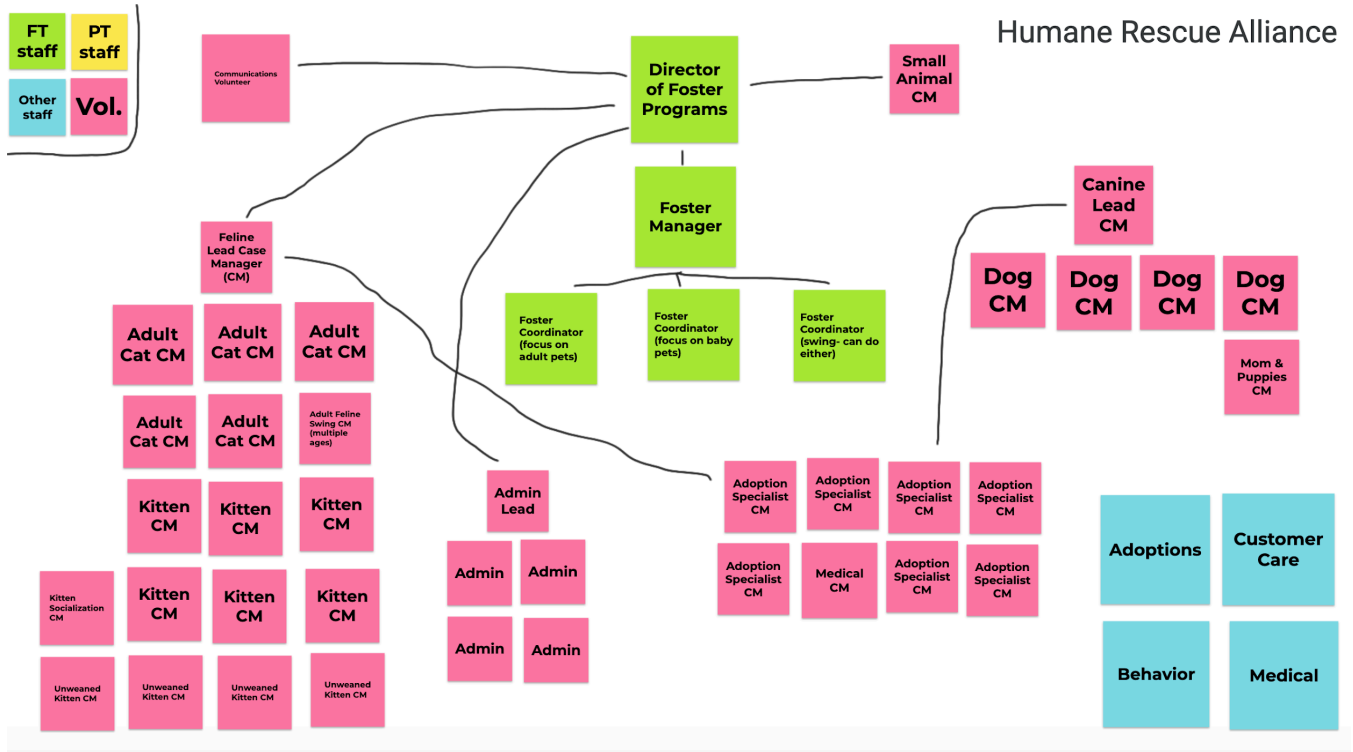
Foster Application Template

This [foster care application template](#) may be used as a base to create a resource that fits your organization's unique setup and needs.

Emergency Foster Plea Templates

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

Data Collection for Foster Care

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

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, and 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 for 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 can be 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 are important so that more specific pathway planning can be completed for the animal. It's equally important that the organization has behavior instructions that are easy to access and understand, as well as 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, making pets susceptible to behavioral decline. Experience and research show 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

Caring for animals with behavioral issues in foster homes may lower the 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 different contexts, which can lead to more individualized care and better-informed decision-making.

Getting Started

Your organization should have clear standard operating procedures (SOPs) and guidelines about pathway planning, risk assessment, and outcome and decision-making before starting a behavior foster program. 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 toward goals, with a timeline for achieving those goals.
        - Example: The number of foster caregivers and animals in the program
- Create SOPs 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 your organization is comfortable sending to foster care and can support. Consider creating "levels" or "stages" to help you plan for future behavior placements.
        - Beginner: Mild behavior concerns such as dogs experiencing shelter deterioration, cats with litter box issues, mild fearful behavior, jumpy/mouthy dogs
        - Intermediate: Mild to moderate reactivity/resource guarding, territorial, moderate to high flight risk/scared, species restrictions with existing in-home pets/setups
        - Advanced: Requires training from behavior team staff prior to the pet being able to be placed in a home, bite history (non-puppy), advanced guarding/reactivity, etc.
    - A pet's needs should inform where to place them. 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 with 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 contact 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. Marketing pets who are in behavioral foster homes can greatly help decrease the 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. Still, they don't necessarily need training in 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 that 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 support 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.
    - Create [Foster Teams](#), a group of people who coordinate and implement all aspects of the care, training, marketing, etc. In addition to the link above, you can 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](#): used to gather pet behavior info from foster caregivers.
    - Explore new programs like [FIT Camp](#), modeled off of 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 home. Potential adopters get to see them in action, the shelter learns more about the behaviors, and the foster pet is tired at the end of the 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 a 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 to connect about lower-level emergencies.
- Utilize [Zoom](#) and other teleconference 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 can 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. Consider the following:

- Estimate the number of work hours needed. The number of weekly work hours required to implement and manage the behavior foster program will depend 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 and personnel at all levels:
  - 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 most 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.

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](#)

Supporting Evidence

[Intake-to-Placement: Supporting Evidence](#)

This document contains a list of supporting evidence on intake-to-placement interventions and support needs. Organizations may wish to use this information to guide programming aimed at increasing live outcomes and expediting those outcomes to reduce the time pets spend housed in shelters. The following topics are included: ***See the topics in bold text below for supporting evidence that accompanies this resource.***

- Access to Care and Pet Support Needs
- **Applications/Interest in Adoption or Foster**
- **Foster Programming**
- **Impact of Kennel Housing/Kennel Stress**
- Intake Reasons Data Collection
- Managed Intake
- Marketing
- Matchmaking
- Outcome Solutions