

Strategic Plan for Foster Families During and After COVID-19

You did the hard work to get pets into foster homes quickly and nimbly during this emergency pandemic situation. But now what? What can you do to keep foster families engaged? How can you support and increase their success in finding adopters? What evolving phases can we plan for now? How do you safely and systematically bring in only those pets who need to return to your shelter, considering you may fill up in the meantime in response to COVID-19 demands?

We hope to answer all these questions in this document; provide ideas to find permanent homes for fostered pets; give you a game plan and structure for after the crisis (when some foster animals are brought back to your shelter); and hopefully share ways to keep the amazing foster volunteers you've gained through this experience engaged in your day-to-day operational needs.

Keeping your foster families engaged and happy

Whether your group is a seasoned foster-based organization, or this is the first time you've put so many pets into community foster homes, fostering is temporary in nature. You still need to market these pets and find adopters, but you can now leverage the team of foster volunteers to help you! As adoption ambassadors, foster volunteers will follow organizational processes and philosophies. With some guidance and help from you, they can also embrace current COVID-19 safety measures and find good homes for their foster pets.

Don't have a formal foster program? The [Best Friends Foster Training Playbook](#) lays out key elements to a successful program and provides SOPs and documents to get you started.

Communicate regularly with staff and foster families

Keeping open communication with foster families is essential to creating lasting, successful relationships. The increase of animals in foster may require additional staff resources dedicated to answering questions and checking in with foster families on a consistent basis.

Since many of the day-to-day tasks are no longer being done the same way, most shelters are trying to keep administrative, clerical, animal care and customer service workers employed and busy. Many organizations in this situation are dividing up the foster families and assigning repurposed staff to be their main contact.

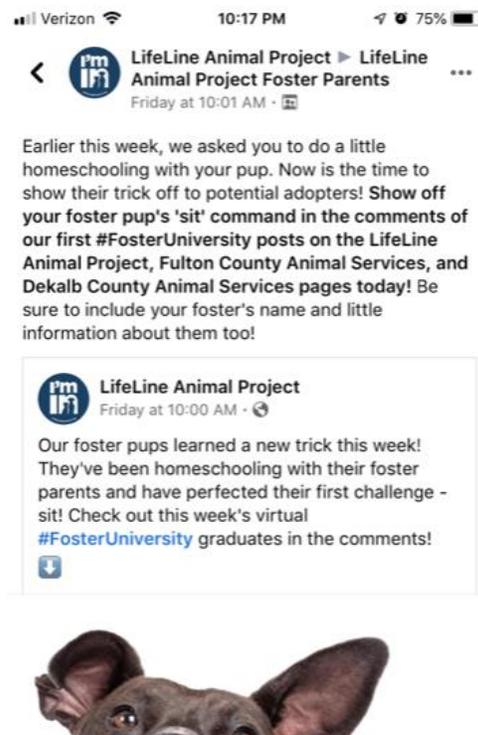
The following resources can help staff and foster families clearly understand the processes and roles they play:

- Key [public messaging](#) for staff to share with the community (American Pets Alive!)
- [Communicating urgency without negativity in emergency fostering](#) (Maddie's Fund®)
- Outlining the adoption [process for fosters](#) (Kansas City Pet Project)

Keep them connected

Here are some creative ideas for keeping foster families connected to your work and with each other:

- Zoom meetings: Host “yappy hours” for all your foster volunteers to connect and talk about their experience. Bonus: Hosting basic virtual meetings on Zoom is free.
- #FosterUniversity FaceTime: Create a Facebook group for your foster volunteers and teach a daily trick for them to showcase on their own page. Bonus: Teaching a dog or cat a trick builds a stronger bond for the foster family and makes the pet more adoptable. (Yes, you should teach some cat skills, too!)



- You can also use Zoom or FaceTime to hold virtual office hours in which foster families can make appointments or call in to ask your foster coordinator or staff questions and voice concerns.
- Email surveys asking how the dog or cat is doing in the home so you can update their profiles in your shelter or rescue database and adoption platform. Below are some

sample questions that go beyond the basics of who the foster caregivers are and the name of the dog or cat they are fostering. Remember to keep the questions few but fun and insightful.

- Where does your foster pet enjoy sleeping at night?
- What does your foster pet like to play with?
- If your foster pet could channel a famous person's voice, who would he or she sound like?
- If your foster pet had a life motto or slogan, what would it be and why?
- Does your foster pet enjoy the company of other pets? Children? Is there any company he or she doesn't seem to enjoy?
- Is there a unique trait that you think will help your foster pet find a new home?
- Are there any behavior concerns that you have? Have you been able to change that behavior? Can you describe how?

Empower foster families to help you and the pets

You have trusted your community members to care for your organization's pets and it's important to continue that trust. When placing a pet who's available for adoption into a foster home, make sure the family knows that the goal is finding an adopter. Give them all the information they need to set them up for success: information about the adoption process and adoption fees, all the medical and behavior history you have on the pet, and guidance on how to best communicate about their foster pet with potential adopters. Maddie's Fund has a comprehensive resource called [Getting Pets Adopted Directly from Foster Homes](#).

Marketing is crucial to placement success. Create a process and a toolkit to help foster families market and place their temporary pet themselves in a good home. Here are a few articles that provide excellent marketing tips for foster families:

- [Shifting Our Marketing Focus to Fosters](#)
- [Six Guidelines for Marketing Your Foster Pet](#)
- [Communications & Marketing Guide for Shelters, Amid COVID-19](#)
- American Farm Foundation's [Best Practices for Marketing](#)
- [Marketing Is Not Adoption Counseling: Keep 'Em Separate, Save More Lives](#)

The process of adopting from foster care

The actual steps you want foster volunteers to take in finding their foster pet an adopter may vary among organizations. Some may empower foster volunteers to have the initial adoption conversation; some may want staff to conduct these conversations. Some organizations may have repurposed staff available to transport foster pets to adoptive homes, while others may

ask foster families to hand the pet off once adopted. Whatever you decide, outline clearly who is responsible for what and provide contact information in case there are questions.

The following are the pivotal interactions usually involved in adoption, adapted for COVID-19 measures, and suggestions for how to make them work:

- a. **Adoption counseling or conversation:** Coach foster volunteers on how to have open and judgment-free conversations with potential adopters and to approach adoption as a matchmaking process for their foster pet. Have the foster volunteer fill out the online adoption form with responses or have the interested party fill out the online form.
- b. **Virtual meet-and-greet:** If, after initial conversations, the family is interested and may be a good fit, do a virtual meet-and-greet with the pet and the family using FaceTime or Zoom. Make sure to answer any questions about the pet's behaviors that you've observed and share what helps the pet to be successful.
- c. **Next steps:** If the family wants to move forward with adoption, how you proceed may vary. Decide beforehand how you want the process to work so foster volunteers know what's expected. For example:
 - i. The foster volunteer can bring the dog or cat to the shelter for an in-person meet-and-greet with the prospective adopter, but first must contact Jane@lkjlkjlkj.org to schedule a meeting.
 - ii. You can allow the foster volunteer to take the pet to the prospective adopter's home for a visit, emphasizing proper social distancing and hygiene throughout.
- d. **Finalize the paperwork:** If the family wants to move forward with the adoption, have them contact the appropriate person to complete the online process. Consider using software like [DocuSign](#) to automate your entire agreement-signing process. DocuSign allows for online signatures and makes documentation management simple. Not only does it remove the need for in-person interactions, it makes it easy for staff or volunteers to process agreements from various remote locations.

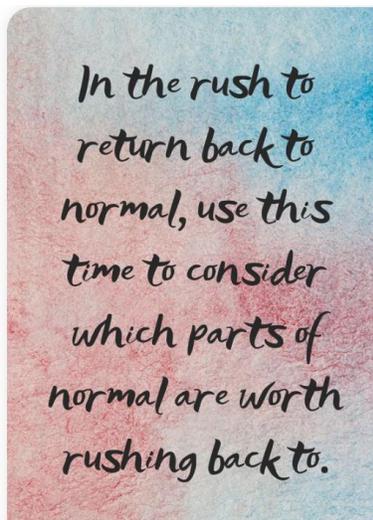
Here are some additional ideas for an adoption toolkit for foster volunteers:

- Give them your adoption philosophies in writing. Here is some information on [open adoptions](#) that they can read and follow.
- Provide information about [Adoption Counseling](#) and do's and don'ts with potential adopters.
- Provide short articles covering basic topics and information to help anyone settle in a new pet successfully. For dogs: [Bringing a new dog home](#), [How to intro dog and cat](#),

Returning to “normal” after the pandemic

We don't know how long the COVID-19 pandemic will last or what the new “normal” will be, but this section lays out what to do when the crisis is winding down.

First, consider NOT going back to normal. Keep remote operations for fostering and adopting as the new normal. There are many benefits to housing animals in homes versus a shelter: The animals get more exercise and stimulation, we learn more about their needs, and we leverage the community's support in caring for and rehoming pets. Having a robust foster program encourages greater community collaboration, empowerment and education by having community members as part of the process of caring for homeless pets.



With that said, you'll most likely be bringing some foster pets back to the shelter after the pandemic has subsided. Below are some suggestions for contacting foster families, developing categories and, if no other option exists, bringing foster pets back to the shelter strategically, by appointment, so as not to overwhelm your shelter operations.

Gathering information from foster volunteers

Before you begin to bring any pets back into the shelter, you'll want to gather information from the foster volunteers to categorize the pets. Potential categories include:

- Foster caregivers who will want to bring the pet back ASAP: Estimate that about 50% will want to do this. These animals will need new placement.
- Caregivers who are OK with keeping their foster pet: These people (about 23%) can continue actively marketing the pets for adoption and become adoption ambassadors.

- Caregivers who are going to keep their foster pets: Finalize these adoptions (about 25% of foster volunteers) as quickly as you can so you can focus your resources on the pets who need new placement.
- Non-responsive caregivers: Representing about 2% of foster homes, these are the ones that you have not heard from and who have ignored all communications.

To gather the information you need from foster volunteers, create a simple Microsoft Form or Google form or even a Survey Monkey form to email to foster homes. You can then compile the responses in a spreadsheet for easy filtering and organizing of the information.

On the form, have foster families enter their name, email address, the name of the foster pet and the animal's ID number (if they have it). Here are some things to consider including on the form:

- Click here if you can keep your foster pet longer and wish to continue as the pet's adoption ambassador, which involves marketing and working to find him/her a home.
- Click here if you would like to adopt the pet and make him/her an official member of your family.
- Click here if you would like to bring the pet back to the shelter. (We'll notify you of the earliest convenient appointment time.)
- Are there any concerns you want to report about your foster pet?
- Would you consider continuing to foster if we could help you get your foster pet ready for a normal work/life routine?

Once responses are received, you can:

- Evaluate and update the status of those foster pets whose families want to adopt
- Update the status of those who'll remain in foster care
- Evaluate the remaining animals: How many could go to a new foster home? Which ones need to return to the shelter?

Here are the next steps for the different categories of foster volunteers:

- **Schedule adoption:** Those who want to adopt their foster pet. Hand these situations off to adoption staff so they can promptly follow up and finalize the adoption.
- **Adoption ambassador foster caregiver:** Those who want to keep the pet and find placement themselves. You'll want to continue to encourage them and find ways to continue engaging them as valuable extended members of your adoptions team. Hopefully, you have already created a toolkit to give them guidance on adopting out the pet and marketing the pet on social media and websites like NextDoor.com. (If not, see "The process of adopting from foster care" above.) It's critical to keep up the

momentum around marketing these animals online for adoption. These volunteers are the “fruits of your labor” and, with proper tending, they can expand your lifesaving capacity.

- **Need new foster home or need return:** Foster volunteers who can no longer keep their foster pet. Once you have your list of animals needing new foster homes or needing to come back, you can get to work on finding new pairings for those you’ll try to keep in foster care and organize (by priority) those who need to come back to the shelter.
- **Dealing with non-responsive foster homes:** Those who won’t communicate with you. There is usually a small percentage of folks who fall into this category. If you’ve checked for correct contact information and are still unable to connect, you need to decide organizationally how long it will be before you go ahead and put the dog or cat into the adopted category and not spend any more staff time on these cases. (Will it be two months, three months, six months? Or after structured attempts, such as after two emails, two phone calls and one certified letter?) Whatever you agree on, you need to have that cut-off point decided so that you and your staff don’t spend too much time on these situations. If someone in this category gets back to you in the future, you can put them back on your radar, but don’t waste excessive time on these cases otherwise.

Once you have a list of the foster volunteers who want to return their foster pets to the shelter, you can begin to look at prioritizing those that you should bring back quicker. You can decide what is important for you. Here are some suggestions:

High priority to bring back:

- Kittens, puppies, unfixed cats and dogs
- Those easy to adopt and move through your shelter quickly to adopted homes
- Those who’ve had issues in the foster home

Low priority to bring back:

- Fixed adult pets
- Those who are more difficult to house in the shelter system and could benefit from more time in foster care

Regarding the foster caregivers who wish to return the pet, contact them by phone to gather further information and set time-frame expectations. Some suggestions for how to conduct that conversation:

- Thank them for helping you and for working with you to bring the dog or cat back strategically to ensure that there is space in the shelter and the proper attention is given to their needs.
- Ask about foster volunteers’ needs regarding return of the pet. Listen to how they are feeling and mirror back to check for understanding and to ensure that they feel heard. It’s important to communicate that you understand their needs and that you will do

your best to accommodate them, but you also need to make sure that shelter operations are not overwhelmed all at once.

- If you haven't done it already, provide them with a link to a form or survey to fill out so they can report all the great behavior of their foster pet, as well as anything they are concerned about. Let them know realistically when the pet might be able to return to the shelter.

Customer service reminders

People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Always remember that how you say something is just as important as what you are saying, and don't be afraid to explain the "why" as much as possible. Keep in mind that smiling when you talk always helps when speaking with any customers. Below are some customer service tips.

Greet:

- Make and maintain eye contact.
- Smile and welcome them to set a positive tone.
- Say your name clearly.
- Be professional and polite, but friendly.

Offer to help:

- Ask how you can help: "How may I help you?" "What can I do for you today?" "Have you been helped?" "Can I answer any questions for you?"
- Be willing to either help them directly, find someone to help them or at least point them in the right direction.

Listen:

- Next, allow them to ask their question, tell their story or express their frustration. Be patient and wait until they are done before you respond.
- Be attentive and ask questions as needed to determine exactly what they want or need.

Empathize and acknowledge:

- Focus on their problem, instead of your policies or procedures. This is especially important when emotions are high.
- Thank them for doing the right thing, don't be judgmental, appreciate the steps they have already taken, be sympathetic. Say things like "I know that can be confusing," so they know you understand.

Problem-solve (only after doing the previous four steps):

- Focus on what you can do, instead of what you can't do.
- Try to be involved, diplomatic and patient.
- Discuss their other options. Be creative about finding solutions.
- Offer to follow up, when appropriate, and then do so. One of the biggest customer service failures is not explaining the "why."

Bringing in the foster pets

Every successful managed intake system brings in non-emergency animals when there is a place to put them. It is what some refer to as Shelter Math 101. In the morning, look at the space you have available. Figure out on average how many strays you typically take in each day and how many pets usually leave through adoption, return-to-owner (RTO) or transfer to another organization. Take into consideration any events or specials that are coming up, and you can begin to schedule your foster pets coming back (and owner surrenders) at a time that is best for you.

Many shelters have a window of time during the day when staff are available to help pet owners and foster volunteers via counseling and assistance with any questions they have. For each case, we suggest allocating half an hour if they have all their paperwork ready to go and a little longer if you feel they might need more time.

Of course, there are always emergencies and people and pets who can't wait, those you bring in right away and for whom you adjust your appointments for the week accordingly. Over time, you will get a rhythm and figure out what works best for your organization. We do caution against scheduling appointments without any knowledge of your current shelter space and where the pet will go in the facility. Some shelters automatically schedule two weeks out for all intake, but that is a recipe for disaster and doesn't really help you manage the space and the number of animals you have in your shelter.

While the people and pets are on the waiting list, have them put the pets' profiles on rehoming sites. You can also help them find a home or resolve any behavior issues. Check on them every couple of weeks to make sure they still need to bring in the pet and assure them that they are on the list and you are doing your best to bring the pet in as quickly as possible.

Try not to give a time frame and don't be afraid to have people wait. There will be many times throughout the year when pet owners or foster caregivers may have to wait a month or more. As long as you are checking on them, continuing to give the "why" of the wait and allowing them to communicate with you if things get worse, they will wait. Most people want a positive outcome for the pet they care about, and therefore most people are willing to wait until you have appropriate space and time.

[Here is a great webinar](#) on managed intake that walks you through all elements of this type of program.

Setting up the appointment system

Create a spreadsheet to organize the information for your waiting list for pets returning to the shelter. The spreadsheet also can be utilized to continue your managed intake program. [Here is an example](#) of what one might look like. This example has all the dogs and cats together, but

consider having different tabs for dogs, cats and other types of pets. It's a good idea to color-code the sheet for stages that the pet is in (e.g., appointment made, rehomed, kept, priority status).

You will want to have the following information on the sheet:

- Foster caregiver or owner's name and contact information, including cellphone number and email address
- Date they contacted the organization
- Name of the pet(s), number of them
- Age, size, altered status, breed, vaccine status if known, ID number
- Description of the problem or reason (more information is better here)
- Dates of contact and next steps for the person surrendering

Feedback from foster volunteers for improvement and further engagement

After you've figured out the categories of pets in foster care and you are working to systematically schedule only those pets needing to return to the shelter, it's time to think about following up with community members who heroically stepped up to foster at the beginning of the crisis. Besides learning about how the pet did during fostering, you can learn more about the foster volunteer's experience, get ideas about how you could improve foster opportunities and better prepare new caregivers for the experience of fostering.

During the follow-up, be sure to thank them for their partnership and consider sharing a stat or figure to help them understand what a difference they made by fostering. Most important of all, be sure to provide ways for them to remain involved.

Questions to ask foster volunteers during the follow-up:

- Was this your first time fostering?
- Would you like to foster again?
- If you foster again, would you want the same or a different species of pet? (You can ask the same question about age, energy level, issues, etc.)
- Is there anything that would have helped you feel better prepared? Are there any improvements you would like to suggest?
- What, if anything, could have made you feel better supported?
- If the person wants to continue fostering: What things do you feel you did well? What things do you feel you need more information about or guidance with?
- If the person is a veteran foster volunteer: What sort of pets and/or issues are you open to? Are there types of pets you prefer fostering?

- Are any of your friends or family members interested in fostering? Do you know any other folks you could recruit to join in the fostering fun?