



FOSTERING CONNECTIONS

A Guide to Strengthening Volunteer and Foster Programs



**PEDIGREE
FOUNDATION.**

This workbook was created in collaboration with
Kristen Hassen of Outcomes for Pets Consulting.

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FORWARD: A Letter from PEDIGREE Foundation

Hello Shelter and Rescue Friends,

We're excited to share **Fostering Connections: A Guide to Strengthening Volunteer and/Foster Programs**, a new toolkit from PEDIGREE Foundation created with Kristen Hassen of Outcomes for Pets Consulting. This resource is packed with practical strategies to boost volunteer recruitment and foster program success.

At PEDIGREE Foundation, we take a foster-forward approach because even short-term fostering - just a few hours or overnight - can change a pet's life. Research from Maddie's Fund shows dogs are 14 times more likely to be adopted after just one foster sleepover. That's a simple, powerful way to save lives.

We're also collaborating with animal welfare experts on continuing education to help shelter and rescue organizations streamline recruitment, intake, and programming - so your staff can focus on helping more pets in need.

Find more foster resources at www.PedigreeFoundation.org/Foster50, including podcasts, recorded webcasts, case studies, and practical tips to support your efforts, or reach out to Meg Meredith, Grants and Shelter Education Manager, PEDIGREE Foundation (megan.meredith@effem.com).

With gratitude,
Deb Fair, Executive Director
PEDIGREE Foundation



PART 1: Introduction

This guide encourages shelters to reimagine how volunteers can support their operations. Could they provide personalized care for recovering pets, reunite lost animals with their families, guide adoptions, and ensure every dog gets essential enrichment?

What if there was a foster program where almost every dog was available for immediate placement? Imagine volunteer foster caregivers marketing pets and completing adoptions from their homes, potentially matching the number of dogs in foster care to those in the shelter itself.

Who Should Use This Guide?

If you're reading this and thinking, "These things would never work in our shelter," or "How do we get there?" — **this guide is for you!**

In this guide, you'll learn everything you need to know to transform your volunteer and foster programs. By following a few simple steps, you can expand volunteer roles and responsibilities, increase the number of daily volunteers, and build a positive organizational culture between staff and volunteers.

Over the past few years, many volunteer and foster programs have become more limited. Smaller volunteer and foster programs make it harder to support the animals in our care. A robust volunteer program expands staff capabilities and allows more animals to get the individualized attention they so desperately need.

"But I'm not the volunteer or foster coordinator." That's okay! Every person in your organization is needed to make your volunteer and foster programs successful. Whether you're an animal care specialist, communications staff, manager, or veterinary technician, this guide will help you reimagine how volunteers and fosters make a difference in the daily lives of people and pets.

Why do we talk about volunteer and foster programs together?

Many shelters miss opportunities by treating volunteering and fostering as separate programs. In reality, they're two sides of the same coin - both attract people who want to help and are willing to give their time. By inviting people to sign up for both programs simultaneously, you create more pathways for involvement and support.

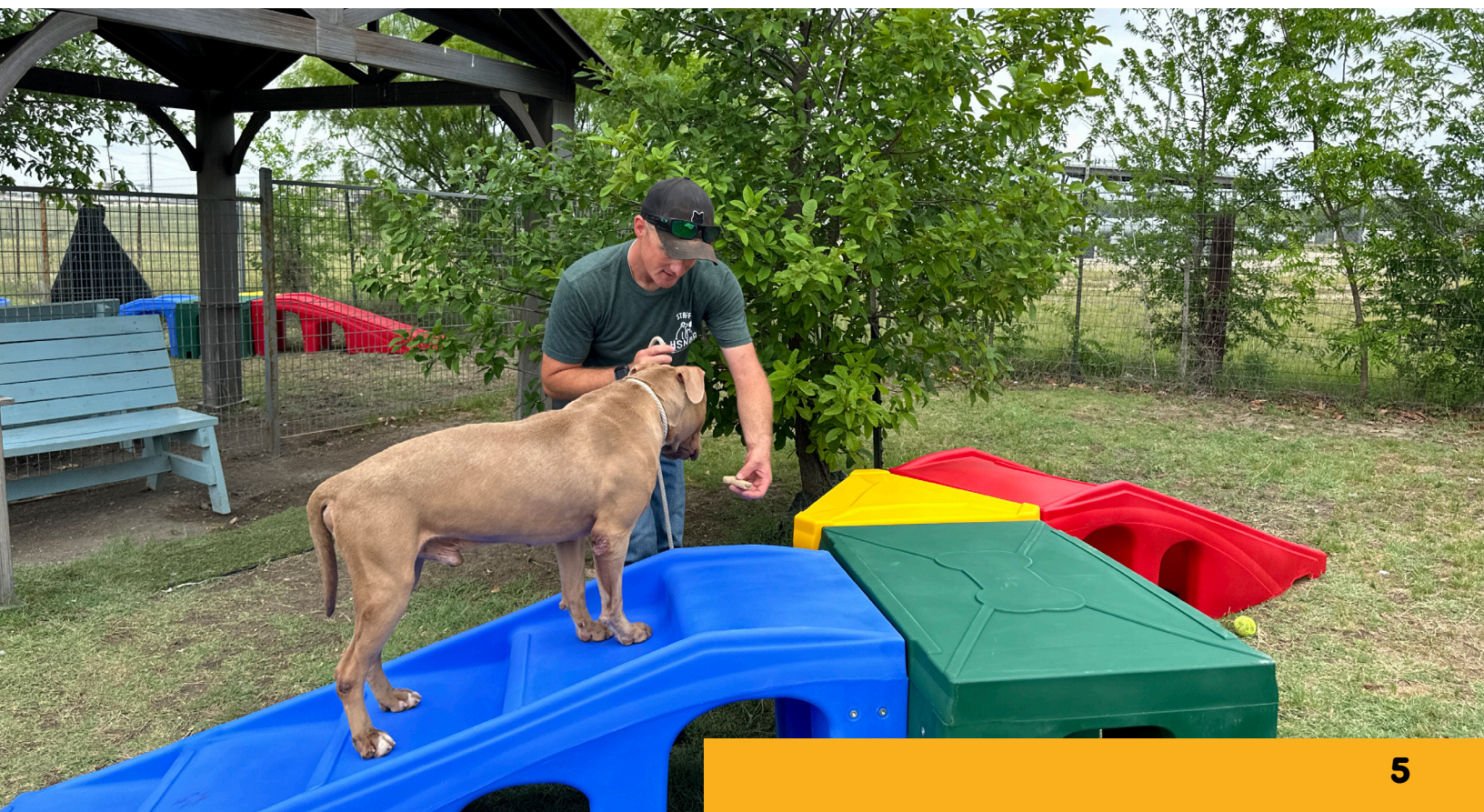
Make Helping Out Simple:

- ✓ Publicly recruit volunteers and fosters at the same time.
- ✓ Make every volunteer a foster and every foster a volunteer. Even if they don't participate in the second program, the important part is that when they're ready, they don't have to take any additional steps to start.
- ✓ Invite volunteers to foster their favorite pets.

Self-Assessment

For the following questions, respond with Y for yes, N for no, and S for sometimes. After completing the self-assessment, discuss as a team. What are the biggest obstacles to volunteering or fostering at your organization? What could you do instead?

- We actively recruit volunteers and foster caregivers on a continuous basis.
- We make most dogs and puppies eligible for foster or adoption.
- We make it fast and simple to sign up and get started.
- Most volunteers can get started within two weeks of completing an application or signing up.
- Anyone who can process an adoption can also process a foster placement.
- Our volunteer orientation can be completed online or in person.
- We hold volunteer and foster meetings at least once per month.
- We have a dedicated volunteer space where volunteers can store supplies, communicate with staff and each other, and work at a computer.
- We have experienced volunteer mentors who onboard and assist newer volunteers.
- Volunteers and foster caregivers have a way to provide feedback and receive a response.
- I would be able to apply as a volunteer and pass all the necessary questions and requirements.
- Our volunteer and foster applications can be completed on a phone or computer.
- Our volunteer onboarding process is accessible to all members of our community.



The Impact of Strong Volunteer Programs

Volunteers and fosters play a critical role in improving the lives of shelter pets. The larger your program, the more opportunities you can provide for pets in your care. Here's how a robust volunteer and foster program transforms your shelter's capabilities:

Direct Animal Care Impact

- » Volunteers provide essential one-on-one time with shelter animals, improving their quality of life and adoptability.
- » They support daily operations like feeding, enrichment, walks, and cleaning, ensuring every animal receives attention and care.
- » Foster caregivers give pets a break from the shelter environment, providing valuable behavior insights and reducing stress.



Adoption and Marketing Support:

- » Volunteers take high-quality photos, write compelling biographies, and add valuable personality notes to animals' files.
- » When volunteers take pets on day trips, sleepovers, or into foster homes, they increase the pets' visibility in the community.
- » Foster caregivers become powerful advocates, helping match pets with potential adopters through their networks.

Community Engagement:

- » Volunteers serve as shelter ambassadors, sharing their experiences and encouraging others to adopt or volunteer.
- » They help community members access resources like lost pet services, free/low-cost veterinary care, and pet retention support.
- » Foster homes effectively double your shelter capacity while providing pets with individualized care.

The result? Shorter lengths of stay, better adoption matches, improved animal well-being, and stronger community connections.

PART 2: Get All the Help You Need

In this first section, we'll show you how to get as many volunteers and foster caregivers as you need. If you're struggling to find volunteers and fosters, or if you need more specific types of help, read ahead.

Website: Your Digital Foundation


Take a closer look at your volunteer and foster pages. These pages may unintentionally discourage the very people you're trying to recruit. Many organizations unknowingly create barriers right on their welcome page, but the good news is this can be easily fixed with significant positive impact.

When people visit a website to offer help or donate, they're looking for two things: a clear sense that their assistance is needed and a simple way to get involved. Potential volunteers are no different.

Too often, websites lead with what volunteers can't do, rather than inspiring them with what they can contribute. When lengthy requirements and restrictions come before a warm welcome, it's like putting up a "Keep Out" sign instead of an invitation.

Flexible Volunteer Opportunities


Whether you're a dedicated animal welfare warrior or just have a few hours to volunteer a month - CAC's volunteer program has opportunities for you to contribute your time and skills!



Long-Term Volunteering

Looking to contribute regular volunteer service? Consider joining any of our long-term volunteer programs!


[Learn More](#)



Corporate Group Volunteering

Looking for a fun team building activity for a corporate or community group? Schedule a one day project with us!

[Learn More](#)



Volunteer From Home!

Not able to volunteer at the shelter? Check out our additional volunteer resources to support us from home!

[Learn More](#)

Cincinnati Animal Care Volunteer Program

Your Website Should:

- » Lead with a warm, genuine welcome and thank you.
- » Show the impact volunteers make through stories and photos.
- » Make it crystal clear how to get started.
- » Include recent photos of volunteers in action.
- » Feature testimonials from current volunteers.
- » Make the sign-up process easy and straightforward.
- » Provide an FAQ section that anticipates and answers common questions.
- » Show flexible scheduling options.
- » Highlight diverse opportunities for every skill set.

Which sounds more welcoming?

This?

“We are currently accepting dog volunteers to do laundry and dishes. You must complete the first two levels of dog volunteering before you can interact with animals. All volunteers must complete a background check before beginning. Please complete this application and note that new volunteers are selected by staff and you may not hear back from us for four to six weeks. Please be patient! Volunteers must be 21 years of age and able to volunteer at least 10 hours per month.”

Or this?

“Thank you for considering volunteering with us! Your time and compassion can transform lives - whether you have one hour or twenty hours to give, we need you. Our volunteers are essential partners in saving lives and creating positive outcomes for pets and people in our community. Sign up here and get started today!”



Social Media: Your Daily Recruitment Tool

The biggest mistake shelters make isn't asking too urgently for help - it's not asking enough, or only asking the same group of dedicated volunteers and fosters repeatedly. While your current helpers are amazing, they can't do it all. You need to be constantly reaching new people and expanding your network of support.

Think of it this way: Your current volunteers and fosters are incredible, but they're probably already doing as much as they can. Every day you don't recruit new helpers is a missed opportunity to expand your lifesaving capacity.

Here's a shocking statistic: Successful shelters typically mention fostering in about 30% of their social media posts, highlighting opportunities more than once a day. In contrast, struggling programs rarely mention fostering, or limit their posts to volunteer and foster Facebook groups - reaching the same audience repeatedly rather than expanding their reach.

Strategies that Work:

- » Share fostering and volunteer opportunities EVERY day.
- » Boost social media posts to reach beyond your current followers.
- » Include direct links to sign up in EVERY post about helping.
- » Seek volunteers for specific roles at specific times.
- » Recruit foster caregivers for particular groups of pets based on your biggest immediate needs.
- » Mix urgent pleas with regular recruitment - both have their place!
- » Share specific stories of pets who need foster homes or volunteer help.
- » Target new audiences through paid social media promotion.
- » Make it easy for new people to take action immediately.



Quick Tips to Try Today

- ✓ Write a news release asking for fosters and volunteers. Invite people to attend a welcome session at a given time or share an equally easy way for them to help.
- ✓ Ask your current volunteers and fosters to share opportunities with their networks. Provide sample texts and images to make it easy and encourage them to share their own stories about why they love volunteering or fostering.
- ✓ Boost posts to reach new audiences - even a small budget helps.
- ✓ Share updates about the impact volunteers and fosters are making.
- ✓ Post daily opportunities for new helpers to get involved. You can vary your recruitment so you connect with people with different abilities and interests.

Examples of Effective Posts:

- ! **Urgent foster plea.** “URGENT: Ten new dogs arrived today and we desperately need foster homes! Never fostered before? No problem - we’ll provide everything you need and show you the ropes. We have a dog or puppy to meet the needs of any household. Whether you can foster a couple of bouncy puppies, a couch potato adult dog, or a senior who needs a soft bed, we have just the foster dog for you!”
- ! **Focus on a particular pet.** “Prism is just a puppy and she’s so scared at all the noises and strange people at the shelter. Even though volunteers are giving her lots of TLC, she needs a foster home where she can spend her days with a family while she waits for an adoptive home. If you would like to foster Prism or another one of our 150 dogs and puppies, you can come to the shelter every day between 3 and 7 pm to meet available pets and take home your first foster!”
- ! **Foster feature and testimonial.** “Meet Foster Mom Sarah and her foster cat, Charlotte! Sarah had never fostered before last month, but decided to give it a try. She posted a story about Charlotte and she found an amazing adopter in just three days. Now Sarah is planning ahead for her next foster because she said, “This is the most fun I’ve had in years and my heart is full knowing she’s got her family and will be loved and cared for permanently.”
- ! **Volunteer spotlight and recruitment:** “Jim started walking dogs last month and has already completed 155 dog walks. That’s a lot of smiling, grateful pups! We need five more morning dog walkers who can come any of the days during the week. We train you and this month, new volunteers get a free, premium leash. Complete this sign-up form and join us as soon as next week.”

Remember that people want to help, but many don’t know they’re needed or think they lack the necessary experience. Every post should make it clear that new helpers are welcome and will be supported.

The key is reaching beyond your current audience. Use every tool at your disposal - news releases, boosted posts, neighborhood social media platforms, community boards, and your current helpers’ networks.

Want to test if your social media is working? Count how many times you mentioned fostering and volunteering in your last 20 posts on each of your social platforms.

If you mentioned these opportunities in at least half of your posts, congratulations! If you made specific asks or recruited for particular volunteer roles or fostering, kudos to you!

Community: Your Local Connection

Building a strong volunteer and foster program means reaching beyond your usual channels. Here's how to expand your community presence:

Share Volunteer and Foster Opportunities:

- » At community events and festivals
- » On local bulletin boards
- » In community forums and online groups
- » At libraries and public spaces
- » Through current volunteers' networks
- » Via neighborhood associations
- » At schools and universities
- » In partnership with corporate sponsors
- » Through local media (radio, TV, newspapers)



Make Helping Rewarding and Convenient:

- » Provide supplies and support for foster homes
- » Offer flexible role options
- » Create remote volunteer opportunities
- » Make training easily accessible
- » Share regular organizational updates
- » Host appreciation events and virtual “happy hours”
- » Send personal thank-you notes to recognize dedication



Application Process: Your Welcome Tool

What if we reimaged the volunteer and foster application process entirely? The most successful volunteer programs have discovered a powerful truth: The best way to get great volunteers isn't through lengthy applications or screening processes, but by making it easy for people to start helping.

Lead with “Yes”

When someone fills out your application, they're raising their hand to help! Avoid responding with a long list of requirements. Instead, start with “Yes, we'd love to have you!” Then, make it easy for them to get started. This sets a positive tone and reinforces their decision to join your cause. The smoother and more welcoming the process, the more likely they'll stay engaged and excited to contribute.

Try This Yourself

Welcome! We're excited you want to help! Here's how to get started:

1. Fill out our quick interest form (It takes less than five minutes).
2. Choose your starting role.
3. Sign up for your first shift or foster opportunity.
4. Complete a brief online orientation so we can show you the ropes before your first day.

Have time to help now? We always need assistance with laundry, dishes, preparing pet treats, and organizing donations. Check out our volunteer drop-in schedule and just show up to help.

Create Multiple Entry Points

Consider different paths for different interests and comfort levels. This way, you can get people to start right away, and your shelter can use a tiered approach to connect volunteers with their right paths.

- ✦ **Quickstart Track:** Perfect for basic tasks and immediate start - includes laundry, greeting visitors, and same-day animal fostering. 15-minute signup with drop-in options.
- ✦ **Animal Handler Track:** Hands-on animal care and adoption counseling with safety training, mentorship, and ongoing support.
- ✦ **Specialty Track:** Advanced care for pets with special needs, tailored to your experience and interests. Includes extra training and combined foster/volunteer opportunities.



Instead of this: “Please complete our five-page application and background check. We’ll review your application within four to six weeks and contact your references. If approved, you can attend our next monthly orientation. These are held every Wednesday at 5 pm and every third Thursday at 11 am.”

Make it Fun to Apply

Challenge your team to make the application process fun. People should feel like they’re joining an exciting community:

- » Introduce volunteer mentors
- » Highlight learning and training opportunities
- » Emphasize the connections and friendships made by volunteers and foster caregivers
- » Make every step mobile-friendly

Quick tips

- ✓ Respond to all applications within 24-48 hours
- ✓ Build in recognition from day one
- ✓ Keep in touch with all applicants
- ✓ Create family-friendly opportunities

Make it Easy to Apply

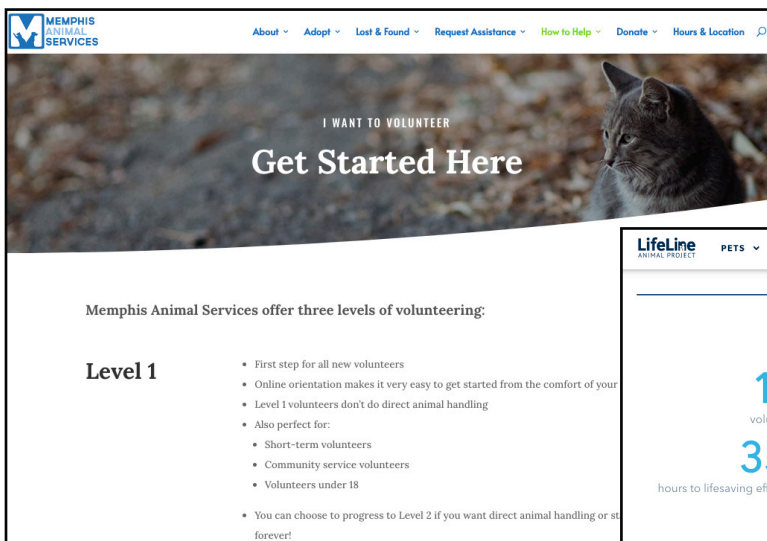
Instead of thinking about it as a screening process, use the volunteer application to get to know people. Here are some helpful questions to ask:

- » What excites you about helping shelter pets?
- » What skills or interests would you love to share?
- » When are you usually available to help?
- » Would you prefer to start with basic tasks or jump right into animal handling and helping adopters meet pets?
- » Are you interested in fostering, volunteering, or both?
- » Do you have any special skills from our checklist that you'd like to share?

Remove Common Barriers

Review your processes to ensure you're not accidentally creating obstacles:

- » Offer orientations at various times without requiring pre-registration
- » Provide both in-person and virtual training options
- » Allow drop-in opportunities for basic tasks
- » Create flexible scheduling options
- » Let volunteers start with simple tasks while training for more complex roles
- » Establish clear feedback systems to identify and address challenges
- » Ensure your recruitment reaches your entire community



Memphis Animal Services



LifeLine Animal Project

Remember This:

Every question you add to your application is another potential barrier to entry. Ask yourself: “Do we really need to know this before someone can start helping?” If not, save it for later. Our job is to welcome people in and help them find their perfect role. You can always add more training and responsibilities as you get to know each volunteer.

Your application process should feel like joining a community of people who love helping animals. Keep it simple and welcoming, and watch your volunteer and foster programs grow and improve.

Success Strategy: Create a “Quick Start” volunteer program where new helpers can immediately assist with basic tasks like laundry, dishes, or greeting visitors. While they’re helping, they can learn about other volunteer opportunities and complete additional training if interested.

The most successful volunteer programs share a powerful secret: Effective training isn’t about creating perfect helpers on day one — it’s about building confident, supported team members who can grow with your organization.



PART 3: Train Your Team for Success

Think about the last time you learned a new skill. Chances are, you learned best when you could practice hands-on, ask questions freely, and had someone supportive showing you the ropes. That's exactly how we should approach volunteer and foster training. The traditional approach of lengthy orientations, requirements to perform menial tasks for a certain period of time, and extensive manuals is outdated and ineffective. Instead, successful programs get people started quickly with basic tasks while providing clear paths for growth.

Research shows adults learn best when training is immediately relevant and hands-on. Here's how to put this into practice:

1. **Start Simple:** Offer a brief online or in-person orientation, cover basic safety and protocols, invite new volunteers to tour the facility, and practice handling animals with a helper nearby.
2. **Build Skills Gradually:** Partner new volunteers and foster caregivers with experienced mentors, provide checklist-style, task-specific guides, and provide regular skill-building sessions. Celebrate milestones and successes publicly and incentivize continued learning and growth.

Hands on Session Example:

"Let's start with what you'll need for today. Watch me walk this dog once, then you'll try with me right beside you. You'll use this equipment and after you watch me put it on, you'll get to try too."

When it comes to foster caregivers, fast-track them with a streamlined approach focused on immediate needs. Give them information about:

- » How to set up their home
- » How to introduce their foster pet to people and other pets
- » How to provide basic daily care and exercise
- » What to do in an emergency
- » Your organization's reliable point of contact who can be reached anytime, such as a staff member or foster mentor.

Any written material you share should be concise and include images and charts, as well as narrative explanations and standard operating procedures. You can gamify training by creating core competency contests for new and recently advanced volunteers and fosters.

The Most Effective Training Programs Include:

- ✓ Multiple learning formats
- ✓ Hands-on practice opportunities
- ✓ Regular check-ins
- ✓ Peer support and mentoring

Your goal isn't perfection — it's progress. By making training accessible and ongoing, you'll build a team of confident, capable helpers who grow with your organization.

Team Discussion:

1. What's one positive change we could make to how we train volunteers and foster caregivers?
2. How could we better support new volunteers and fosters in their first week?
3. What tasks in your department are good opportunities for new people to try hands-on learning?

Your training program should empower people to help while keeping everyone safe and supported. When you combine proven training methods with shelter-specific knowledge, you create a program that works for everyone — staff, volunteers, fosters, and most importantly, the animals in your care.

A Word About Safety

Safety doesn't come from a list of rules - it comes from creating a culture where everyone looks out for each other and the animals in our care. The most successful programs make safety feel empowering rather than restrictive. Instead of listing what NOT to do, focus on teaching them how to:

- » Read situations
- » Know their limits
- » Make good decisions
- » Feel confident asking for help



Think about safety like building a bridge of trust. From day one, help volunteers and foster caregivers understand that speaking up about safety concerns isn't "complaining" or "getting someone in trouble." It's protecting everyone.

If a volunteer experiences a situation that is concerning or potentially unsafe, they should feel a responsibility to bring it up. The fastest way to build trust is by celebrating those who raise concerns and responding quickly when they do.

Building a Culture of Safety

Here's how to weave safety into your training without making it feel overwhelming:

- ✓ **Start with the basics:** "Here's how we keep everyone safe and happy."
- ✓ **Explain why:** "We use a harness and collar to ensure the dog can't slip out and get away."
- ✓ **Make it practical:** "Let's practice reading dog body language together. Does that dog look fearful or excited to see us?"
- ✓ **Build confidence:** "Here is who to ask when you're not sure."
- ✓ **Reinforce regularly:** "Thanks for double-checking that gate!"
- ✓ **Share stories:** "Here is how one volunteer handled this situation when it happened to her..."
- ✓ **Encourage questions and feedback:** "If you're ever unsure about anything, just ask! We're all here to help, and your questions make us better at what we do."



Remember: A strong safety culture isn't about fear or rigid rules - it's about building competent, confident helpers who know their own boundaries, understand safety protocols, and handle challenges appropriately. When people feel equipped and informed, they're more likely to champion safe practices.

Sample training: Maddie's University

- » [Maddie's University | Animal Welfare Education Courses: Dog Handling in the Shelter](#)
- » [Maddie's University | Animal Welfare Education Courses: Canine Body Language in the Shelter](#)

PART 4: Create a Positive Culture

Communication Is Everything

The number one reason volunteers and foster caregivers stop helping? It's usually not burnout or lack of time — it's feeling disconnected, unappreciated, or taken for granted. Great communication isn't just about sharing information; it's about making volunteers and foster caregivers feel like valued members of your lifesaving team.

Think about your current communication style. Do you only reach out when there's a problem? Do volunteers and fosters learn about changes after they've already happened? Are you relying on the same few "super volunteers" because it seems easier? Over the past few years, volunteer and foster programs have been getting smaller, not bigger, which means we need to take active steps to grow and expand our programs to help as many pets as possible.

What Works?

- » Give regular updates about shelter news and wins via newsletter, bulletin board, or a weekly email blast.
- » Use a volunteer management software system that gives volunteers access to important information and shelter database details.
- » Hold in-person meetings whenever possible.
- » Address difficult or potentially inflammatory topics in person rather than in writing to avoid miscommunication.
- » Offer clear, consistent messaging about procedures with simple checklists and policies.
- » Use multiple communication channels (email, text, in-person, personal notes).
- » Prioritize two-way dialogue rather than just sharing announcements.
- » Create a way to get feedback and provide quick responses to questions and concerns.
- » Conduct periodic personal check-ins and reach out individually to thank fosters and volunteers who go the extra mile.



Group Discussion:

1. How often do you meet with volunteers and foster caregivers? Would meeting more regularly be beneficial? Why or why not?
2. What could staff do to improve relationships with volunteers and foster caregivers? What could volunteers do to improve relationships with staff?
3. How are you recognizing and celebrating your helpers?

Here's an Example:

Instead of this announcement: "Attention all volunteers: Effective immediately, we've changed all our dog walking procedures and volunteers will no longer be able to walk dogs after 5 pm. Please see the updated standard operating procedure attached to this document."

Try this instead: "Hey dog walking team - We've got some updates and questions for you about what hours work best for our volunteer program. Thank you for all your written feedback so far! Join us this Saturday at 10am before mid-morning playgroups for a 30-minute discussion about extending dog walking hours while maintaining safety. If you can't make it, we'll record the meeting and share the recording afterward."

Building a Positive Culture

Culture isn't something that just happens — it's built one interaction at a time. Among all possible mistakes we could make, failing to focus on creating a positive animal shelter culture and holding volunteers, staff, and fosters accountable poses the greatest threat to successful volunteer and foster programs.

Building a positive shelter culture goes beyond just being nice to each other - it's about creating an environment where everyone feels valued, supported, and excited to contribute. Next, we'll explain how successful shelters do it.



Culture-Building Quick Wins

- ✓ Start each shift with a brief team huddle
- ✓ Create a “Wins of the Week” celebration board
- ✓ Host a graduation ceremony to recognize mentor/mentee relationships
- ✓ Share and discuss the values and culture of the shelter

Make It Fun

Think about it — helping animals should be one of the most rewarding experiences in someone’s day! Try these culture-building activities:

- » Create team challenges (Who can get the most dog-walking miles this month?)
- » Celebrate milestones (“Our foster team helped 100 puppies this year!”)
- » Host regular social events for volunteers and foster caregivers
- » Share wins, challenges, and important news
- » Create volunteer and foster swag — helping shelter pets becomes part of their identity!



Breakdown the “us vs. them” mentality

One of the biggest culture killers in shelters is the division between staff and volunteers/fosters. When rifts develop, it can be difficult to repair without taking intentional steps to build positive relationships and help each side better understand the other’s perspective. Here are a few simple ways to help everyone work well together.

- » Include volunteers in staff meetings when appropriate
- » Create mixed volunteer and staff teams for projects and events
- » Involve volunteers and foster caregivers in decision-making when possible
- » Recognize examples of volunteers and staff working together
- » Provide mediation for disagreements where both parties have reasonable positions, helping to resolve conflicts and repair relationships
- » Value everyone’s input, recognize all contributions, and create opportunities for staff and volunteers to socialize



Two ways we have really improved our program here is through surveying. We send a monthly new volunteer survey to all volunteers who just started with us the month prior, as well as an annual survey to all active volunteers. Feedback is a gift. Without knowing their experiences, or their casual ideas while chatting amongst themselves, we wouldn’t be able to listen to our customer. Volunteers not only being heard, but knowing they are being heard has drastically changed the overall engagement. In fact, this year’s survey shows us an astounding 94.8% engagement score, the highest we’ve seen since starting the survey several years ago. That’s the power of listening!

– Sarah Sukhram, Pasco County Animal Services

Empower Your Team

People stay engaged when they feel trusted and capable: everyone works well together.

- » Let experienced volunteers mentor and train new volunteers
- » Empower foster caregivers to seek adopters and serve as adoption counselors
- » Create leadership opportunities within your volunteer and foster programs for those who demonstrate commitment and alignment with your shelter workplace values
- » Implement suggestions made by volunteers and foster caregivers
- » Trust people with responsibility
- » Organize volunteer-staff swaps where roles are switched for a half-day or a day with support and supervision
- » Allow volunteers to lead projects or initiatives, like educational events, fundraisers, and more to develop leadership skills

Share the Why

When people understand the reasoning behind policies and decisions, they're more likely to support them:

- » Explain changes thoroughly before implementing them
- » Share the shelter's goals and progress regularly
- » Be transparent and honest about challenges and mistakes
- » Practice piloting new programs and policies before permanently adopting them
- » Celebrate collective wins
- » Connect daily tasks to the bigger mission and vision

Clear communication builds trust and fosters collaboration. By sharing the "why" behind decisions, you create an environment where staff, volunteers, and supporters feel informed, valued, and inspired to contribute. When people see how their efforts align with the larger mission, they become stronger advocates for your cause.

Instead of this: "Volunteers must submit behavior notes on each animal before the end of their shift. If you do not submit these, the hours for that day will not be counted. Thank you for your cooperation."

Try this: "Help us out by marking the board whenever you take a dog out for a walk. If you have time, please enter a note about your experience. Your notes about each dog's walks help us make better matches with adopters. Last month, Maya's walking notes helped us find her perfect family who loved that she knew basic commands like sit, stay, and shake!"

This approach fosters a culture of trust, accountability, and shared purpose, driving greater engagement and long-term success.

Learn from Others

See how other organizations have built strong volunteer and foster programs:

- » [Louisville Foster](#)
- » [Lifeline Foster](#)
- » [Cincinnati Foster Program](#)
- » [PACC Volunteer Program](#)
- » [Memphis Volunteer Program](#)
- » [Pedigree and Austin Pets Alive! Virtual Foster Handbook](#)
- » [Best Ideas to Attract, Retain, & Grow Animal Shelter & Rescue Volunteers | ASPCApro](#)

PART 5: Building the Future

A thriving volunteer and foster program doesn't happen by accident — it's built through intentional action and continuous improvement. Every organization starts somewhere, and every shelter faces its own unique challenges. However, successful volunteer and foster programs share one vital characteristic: **they prioritize making it easy for people to help.**

Start Making a Difference

Whether you're starting from scratch or revitalizing an existing program, your focus should be on removing barriers, building connections, and creating clear paths for involvement.

Steps to Get Started

- ✦ Simplify your application process — make it possible to start helping within 48 hours
- ✦ Create a “quick help” option where new volunteers can drop in and assist with basic tasks
- ✦ Set up regular volunteer/foster meetups to build community and share updates
- ✦ Start a mentor program pairing experienced helpers with newcomers
- ✦ Track and celebrate milestones — both individual and program-wide
- ✦ Share daily opportunities on social media and boost posts to reach new audiences
- ✦ Make every animal handler a potential foster — remove barriers between programs
- ✦ Create clear paths for growth with documented training steps
- ✦ Survey your current volunteers and fosters about ways to improve
- ✦ Set monthly goals for volunteer hours and foster placements
- ✦ Build a library of resources that helpers can access anytime
- ✦ Establish regular check-ins with staff about volunteer integration
- ✦ Make recognition part of your routine — from thank you notes to public appreciation

Set Goals

As you expand your volunteer and foster programs, set goals that aim high for recruitment and foster placements and check in on your progress at least once per quarter. Here are a couple of examples:

- ✓ 5,000 volunteer hours per month (Larger Organizations)
- ✓ 2,000 volunteer hours per month (Average Size Organizations)
- ✓ 100 or more full-time active volunteers at any given time
- ✓ 50% of your population housed in foster homes at any given time

Remember: Every person who raises their hand to help represents an opportunity to save more lives. The time you invest in building and supporting your volunteer and foster programs will return dividends in the form of more helped animals, stronger community connections, and increased capacity to fulfill your mission.

Your community is ready to help. They're waiting to walk your dogs, socialize your cats, fold your laundry, and open their homes to animals in need. They're ready to be your ambassadors, your support system, and your extended family.

Every day someone out there is thinking, "I wish I could do something to help." Your job isn't to do it all – it's to open the door and show them how.

Your community is ready to help. Let them.





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