

Foster Care: Opening Your Home to a Homeless Animal

Some of the most important work performed by Lollypop Farm volunteers takes place away from the shelter. More than 160 dedicated volunteers participate in our foster care program, which provides temporary homes for animals in need. As you read this newsletter, about 220 pets are living in foster care homes.

Foster program volunteers help care for animals who would do better in a home environment or those we cannot properly house in our facility. Their help enables Lollypop Farm to give a second chance to pets who may not be able to get that opportunity in the shelter, which handles around 13,000 animals each year. Last year, 156 families provided temporary homes for 1,022 animals.

These pets include kittens, puppies, and pets recuperating from injury or illness, such as broken bones or heartworm disease. In most cases, foster animals are either not old enough or not healthy enough to be put up for adoption at the shelter. Besides dogs and cats, foster families open their homes to small animals such as rabbits and guinea pigs.

The Comforts of Home

The foster care program is essential to Lollypop Farm's operations. "The program makes a gigantic difference in the lives of animals that are temporarily unadoptable," says Gillian Hargrave, director of strategic initiatives at Lollypop Farm. "Additionally, it allows them to grow up or rehabilitate in an environment that is quiet and serene, as opposed to a noisy shelter environment. It also relieves space issues in the shelter."

In addition, volunteers can discover animals' true personalities. Because an animal shelter presents a new and unfamiliar environment for pets, getting a complete picture of an animal's personality can be a challenge. A foster parent observing a pet at home, may see, for example, that her foster kitty is a total lap cat or that her foster dog loves his daily jogs around the neighborhood with her. This detailed information can be provided to potential adopters to help create the best match.

The most common foster care situation involves litters of young kittens, who must be at least eight weeks old and weigh at least two pounds before they can return to the shelter to be spayed or neutered in preparation for adoption. Puppies, also common in the foster program, must be eight weeks old if males and 12 weeks if females.

“Volunteers enable us to give a second chance to pets who may not be able to get one in the shelter.”

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Volunteer Profile: Sue Dusett

Five years ago, most of the volunteers in Sue Dusett's foster-care training class requested to be given kittens to foster—and so did she. With so many requests, Sue thought she might never get to foster a litter. She had no reason to worry. "I don't think I've ever gone more than five days without a kitten," she says now. Sue usually takes care of two litters at a time in her home and keeps them until they are old enough for adoption. In addition to her foster work, she also volunteers at Lollypop Farm as an adoption counselor.

With eight cats and two dogs of her own, Sue loves "always having a kitten around." Some of those kittens have remained in her home into adulthood. "The last five I've kept were fosters," she says. "A lot more of it was my husband—in fact, my kids said that he needs a kitten patch, like the cigarette patch!"

One of her favorites is Whiskers, whom she decided to adopt. Whiskers is so laid back that he even plays with the vacuum—a common kitty nightmare—when it's running. "Nothing fazes him," says Sue.

Like Karen, Sue has found homes for many of her charges among friends and relatives. Often this happens simply by word of mouth. "[People will] call and ask, 'Do you have a kitten?'"

Sue emphasizes the need for foster care volunteers to help Lollypop Farm. "If you run out of foster homes, there's nowhere for them to go," she says. "I don't think people really realize the need for it."



Before they can be returned to the shelter for sterilization and adoption, kittens must be eight weeks old and weigh two pounds.

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Kittens are the most common foster pets cared for by Lollypop Farm volunteers.

"It's more common to get a litter of kittens alone than with a mother," says Gillian. "The kittens have to be about four weeks of age to put in foster care—they have to be able to eat on their own."

When they join the foster care program, volunteers choose which sorts of animals they would like to help. A foster parent who takes an animal home from the shelter will typically care for them for a minimum of two to four weeks; a mother with a newborn litter requires two months. Spring and summer pose the highest demands for volunteers.

Foster care requires more than just time. "It's a commitment for the parents," says Gillian. "They have to have space available that can be cordoned off. Cats need to have their own room—they are not supposed to intermingle with somebody's pets." Lollypop Farm provides as much of the necessary supplies as possible, she says.

Saying Goodbye

But perhaps the most difficult part about foster care volunteering comes when it's time to bring the animal back to the shelter for adoption. Even though volunteers know that each foster pet is only a temporary resident, the drive back to Lollypop Farm can be a tough trip.

"It can be really hard to give these animals back," says Gillian. But because volunteers have their own networks of family and friends that can be prime sources of interested adopters, she welcomes the help of foster caregivers in finding homes for their charges.

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Teddy, a golden retriever, is the favorite former foster dog of Karen Grover, a longtime volunteer.

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Volunteer Profile: Karen Grover



Karen Grover holds a cat in our Pet of the Week program.

Karen Grover has opened her home to Lollypop Farm dogs in need for over nine years. She also gives shelter tours as an educator, volunteers with the Pet of the Week program, and writes web descriptions of adoptable animals.

Over the years, Karen has helped many dogs who are heartworm-positive; she usually keeps them for a month or two. One dog had suffered a broken jaw after being hit by a car, while another came from an investigation case and was undergoing rehab for his injuries.

Her message to potential volunteers who worry about how they will be able to give back the pets? "It's totally worth it," she says. "That's going to be a dog that's saved. You're

making a huge difference, so that makes it worth it. And I call it my doggie fix—because we can't have a dog." (Karen and her husband have one senior cat, Daphne.)

The most rewarding part of volunteering for Karen is the messages from Lollypop Farm telling her that one of her foster animals has been adopted. And because Karen's friends have made up more than half of the adopters for those pets—including her favorite, a golden retriever named Teddy, she still sees some of the animals regularly.

Karen suggests that others consider the foster care program. "I'd just encourage everybody to do it," she says. "I really do."

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If a particular friend of a volunteer wants a specific kitten, for example, she will be put on hold when she returns to the shelter, at which point the interested person can fill out an adoption application. And of course, foster parents have first dibs on adopting their resident animals.

When volunteers want to discuss the difficulties of giving a pet back, the joy of seeing an animal get a new home, or else talk about any other fostering topics, Lollypop Farm provides an online discussion group where they can do just that. The staff also use the group to relay information to volunteers, such as current needs and upcoming events.

Speaking of events, if you are 21 or older (or younger with a parent or guardian's written permission) and would like to learn more about becoming a foster care volunteer, you are invited to a free informational meeting on Wednesday, July 15, at 6 p.m. For more information, please contact Gillian Hargrave at (585) 223-1330 x257 or ghargrave@lollypop.org. ●

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