

Serving Animals: Changing the Face of Foster Care

Foster care programs place special-needs animals in temporary homes to receive hands-on care until they become healthy and adoptable.

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Foster care programs bridge the gap between animal shelters and the community such programs also are wonderful opportunities to attract people who otherwise might not get involved with shelter animals, Villalon said. Foster programs not only benefit from families who want to help shelter cats, but also from single people, retirees and even the frequent-flying traveler who doesn't stay home long enough to own a pet.

In fact, shelters are discovering that great foster volunteers can be found in many nontraditional places, such as senior centers, local businesses that support shelter work, boarding kennels, veterinary hospital lobbies and classrooms. Assumptions should not be made about people's lifestyles or ability to provide the "perfect" foster home, Villalon said. For example, college students frequently leave their animals with their parents and often miss their pets. A college student's hectic schedule may not be suitable for raising "bottle babies," but it may do wonders for an undersocialized cat, she said.

The bottom line is "it's unlikely that you'll ever find a foster home more stressful than a shelter environment," Villalon said.

Foster programs will continue to evolve and grow in popularity because they focus on life and success.

"We can reduce the number of healthy animals being killed because we are spreading them around our community," Villalon said.

To be truly successful, though, good foster programs must go hand-in-hand with good adoption programs, she said. "We often have 200 people on a kitten waiting list. People are willing to wait because they know they will receive a healthy, well-socialized kitten through our foster program."