

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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"Jasper," a tiny cream tabby kitten, was 2 weeks old when he was thrown away. The box he and his four litter mates were in was taped shut, but Jasper and his siblings had one tiny asset their voices. Their weak cries were heard by a passerby who quickly rushed them to the local animal shelter.

In the past, even this stroke of luck probably would not save Jasper's life. Kittens like him were, and in many areas still are, routinely euthanized at animal shelters nationwide. Because of the number of healthy, adoptable cats that are available for homes and because orphaned kittens often die despite human care, overworked shelter staff are rarely able to devote themselves to unweaned kittens that require round-the-clock attention.

Sick, injured or undersocialized cats also fall through the cracks at many shelters. Cats and kittens with special needs require time and care - a rare commodity at most shelters. That's where foster care comes in.

Foster care programs place animals with special needs in temporary homes where they receive hands-on care until they become healthy and adoptable. The idea has been around since shelters first began often in a kind of behind-the-scenes, informal way.

If you work at a shelter, at some point you are going to spend a weekend feeding a little critter, no matter what the personal cost. Recently, though, foster care has achieved a higher profile in many shelters, evolving into organized programs that provide in-depth training to people in local communities, empowering them to save animal lives.

The Humane Society of Boulder Valley in Boulder, Colo., an "open door" shelter with a 100 percent placement rate of adoptable animals, is helping to lead the way. It accepts every animal in need that does not qualify for immediate placement in its adoption center. While several factors contribute to its successful adoption rate, the foster care program, which was started in 1988, is an essential part of its success today, according to Dori Villalon, the associate director.

"Foster care at our shelter reduces euthanasia and gets the community involved," Villalon said.

Last year, 145 volunteers participated in the program. In 1999 nearly 60 percent of the society's hours were dedicated to it and 1,183 animals were placed in temporary foster homes prior to their adoption. The majority of fostered animals were kittens.