

The Humane Society of West Michigan

THE INS AND OUTS OF FOSTERING

Fostering exists to give pets a safe and stable place to stay while they await adoption. Humane societies do the best they can with the limited staff they have, but with a large volume of animals, many go most of the day without receiving much attention. Foster homes can give these pets a boost of happiness and affection. The Humane Society of West Michigan (HSWM) connects animals to these loving foster homes.

Keeping Pets With Their Owners

In addition to traditional fostering of unwanted and stray animals, HSWM offers fostering for unique situations: caring for the pets of people who are



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PHOTOS | THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF WEST MICHIGAN

in between housing, getting treatment for physical or mental health and those experiencing domestic violence. Losing housing is a stressful situation to begin with. Imagine also having to give up your best friend.

Surrendering pets due to unstable housing is a common phenomenon in the U.S. Homeless shelters don't accept pets, and not everyone can bring their animals when staying with friends or family. Foster volunteers can help reunite these pets with their owners once they get back on their feet. This program provides a short-term solution that lasts about 30 days.

Ashley Dahl, director of community programs, describes a recent situation with a veteran who needed medical testing. He needed to be at the VA hospital for several weeks and had no one to watch his dog. "It was heartwarming to see them reunited," Ashley says. This is the fourth year they've offered the program.

Traditional Fostering Programs

While it helps when pet foster parents already have supplies like toys and food, HSWM provides these to foster volunteers at no cost, in addition to paying for vet appointments and necessary surgeries or medications. If you think you want to foster but are unsure how to care for an animal, there are resources to guide you.

Several circumstances are a better fit for fostering than having the animal stay at HSWM. Some animals, especially young kittens and puppies, need socialization and toilet training. Being in a home with people enables them to get used to human contact. There are also newborn animals in need of bottle feeding.

Pets that need special medical care or care after surgery also benefit from foster homes. Then, of course, there are the pets who simply need a place to stay until they are adopted or reunited with their owner.

Fostering is something everyone who's able and interested should consider.

Who Should Foster?

The simple answer to who would make an ideal foster home is anyone who has the space, time and love in their heart to spare. Fostering could be healing for someone who recently lost a pet and misses cuddles. It can serve as a learning experience for anyone who's curious about getting a pet but is unsure about being able to handle the commitment.

Those with other pets can still foster so long as they separate any foster pets from their own animals, sometimes temporarily, sometimes for the entire foster experience, since not all foster pets are good with other animals. For this reason, petless foster homes are seen as rare gems. College students home for break often make perfect foster candidates because of this, as well as people who travel often.

How to Get Started

Applications are the first step of the fostering process. HSWM takes applications through its website. The information required is fairly basic. They'll want to know about any other pets in your home, whether they're up-to-date on vaccines and why you want to foster.

After your application is accepted, you'll join an online group where pets available for fostering are posted. From there, you can choose an unclaimed animal to foster that's been recently posted.

Why It Matters

Fostering is something that can pull on your heartstrings, but it's every bit worthwhile. It's not always easy and requires flexibility and patience. The animals aren't always perfect and might need time to adjust. Some may have lived on the streets for months or come from a hoarding situation. Others need to be given medication.

"If the fuzzy warm cuddles aren't enough to convince you, making a positive difference is a powerful motivator," Ashley says. "Fostering is something everyone who's able and interested should consider. If it doesn't work out, there's no harm done. Any love that can be given to an animal, however brief, is worth the effort." □

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