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Four-Legged Fostering

In 2015, Karen Denise walked into an animal shelter to volunteer as a dog walker. Having grown up with dogs, she had always loved spending time with them, though her busy work schedule precluded getting her own permanent pet. “I have commitment issues,” she joked. While there, she learned about a new opportunity—fostering dogs.

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It’s said that when you foster an animal, two lives are saved. The dog that’s removed from an overcrowded shelter is spared from possible euthanasia, and a space is opened up for another dog. “That altruistic part really appealed to me,” says Denise, senior director of wealth client services at CAPTRUST in Raleigh.

She signed up for the foster program and soon got a call about Mighty Mouse.

A three-year-old shepherd mix who had been a stray, Mighty Mouse had a comical appearance due to a medical condition that caused his eyelids to roll back. The animal shelter had scheduled corrective surgery to make him healthy for adoption, but wanted Denise to take him afterward and provide a calm environment for recovery. As he healed in her home, he became relaxed and playful, and he seemed to know she had helped him. “I felt Mighty Mouse was very grateful to be out of the shelter,” says Denise, who kept him for a few months until he was adopted.

Denise felt she had gotten as much, if not more, out of that fostering experience as Mighty Mouse did. So, she kept going. And going.

The next call that came was for a pit bull mix, Lucy. “A lot of people are drawn to puppies the same way they are drawn to babies,” says Denise. At eight years old, Lucy was an older dog who was at risk

of being euthanized. "She had the saddest eyes, and she was on doggy death row with a 'final hold date' for the following week. So I said 'OK, I'll foster this dog.'"

With Lucy, it was not love at first sight, but it grew into love. Lucy proved to be fiercely protective, and the two bonded to such a degree that Denise would find herself in tears when families showed interest in possibly adopting Lucy. It soon became clear that she was meant to keep Lucy for life. "She was the sweetest dog, and I had her for four years," says Denise.

When you're a dog lover without a pooch in the house, nothing else can really fill that dog-shaped hole. Though you crave the companionship of a furry friend, there's often some good reason or other—travel, complicated lives, commitment phobia—why it's not the right time to add a permanent pet to the family.

Puppies are adorable, but many households aren't ready for a partnership that can last 12 to 15 years. But fostering a dog can be deeply fulfilling, without the commitment.

"A lot of people don't know about fostering. They think adoption is the only way to help," says Denise. If you have the space for a four-legged guest, there are foster opportunities ranging from a few hours to a few years.

"There are always animals needing to be fostered. The summer is especially busy for puppies and kittens, because animals go into season in the spring and have litters," says Chelsey Bosak, foster home recruiter and programs department administrative coordinator for Helping Paws, Inc., of Hopkins, Minnesota.

Helping Paws relies heavily on foster families, although it doesn't work with shelter animals. The nonprofit organization trains service dogs who are bred for the job for two and a half years and places them with individuals with physical disabilities, veterans, or first responders with post-traumatic stress disorder.

The volunteer foster home trainers take home the puppies when they are eight weeks old and take them to classes each week to learn necessary skills, such as opening doors, picking up items, and taking care of their people. "It's a big responsibility, like having a child in your home. By the time the dogs graduate, they've been trained into service dogs," says Bosak.

Benefits of Fostering

A growing body of research shows that fostering, even short term, greatly improves shelter dogs' wellness and helps them get adopted. Animal foster programs have evolved to offer more flexible options to volunteers, so that people with limited time or resources can host a pet, too.

Foster programs save shelter animals' lives and help them find homes more quickly. When foster families take dogs out to restaurants and parks, they're more likely to attract the attention of potential adoptive families who might otherwise have gotten pets from breeders or pet stores, according to a 2014 study published in the journal *PLoS One*.

Fostering relieves pressure on overtaxed animal shelters and makes dogs more adoptable. In one study, dogs with low chances of adoption due to poor health or age were placed in foster homes temporarily. After returning to the shelter, their average odds of eventually finding a permanent home increased fivefold, according to a 2018 study published in the journal *Animals*.

Short foster home stays help dogs get socialized and bring out attractive aspects of their personalities.

"The shelter is kind of a depressing place. The dogs, especially if they came from a home, can be very confused, and their personalities don't come out," says Denise.

Even a one- or two-night stay in a comfortable home gives pups a break from the shelter and decreases their stress. Dogs awaiting adoption at four animal shelters had lower levels of cortisol, a stress hormone, and showed other physiological benefits after spending two nights in a foster home, according to an Arizona State University study.

Types of Dog-Foster Programs

Want to foster a dog? Short outings and weekend programs are becoming popular, along with adult dog fostering. Options run the gamut from an hourlong walk in the park to a hosting and training relationship of a few years.

Field trips. If you can't have a pet due to your schedule, or you're considering adoption, a brief doggie date can be a fun way to get familiar with different breeds and learn what would suit you. Shelter dogs delight in a trip to a park, a walk in the woods, or a chance to practice basic obedience commands like "sit" or "stay." Plus, the resulting photo ops can improve adoption chances.

Sleepover or weekend fostering. A one- or two-night visit provides a fun experience for humans and measurable health benefits for the dogs. Check to see whether animal shelters in your area offer weekend or holiday fostering events that could be something novel for your family to do.

Adult dog fostering. Since people love adopting puppies, adult dogs often languish in shelters. Older dogs are in desperate need of temporary homes where they can feel cared for and calm. They show improvements in happiness, mood, and friendliness after just one day in foster care, with even greater well-being after longer periods, according to Maddie's Fund, an animal welfare foundation with headquarters in Pleasanton, California.

Service dog training. This intensive volunteer opportunity isn't for everyone, but long-term foster families are needed to host service dogs in training. "We have all different kinds of people fostering—college students, families with kids, and couples with other animals in the home. We get some empty nesters who are looking for a passion project. The biggest thing we look for is someone who can commit to the two-and-a-half years, and then be able to pass that dog along to the person who is going to receive the service dog," says Helping Paws' Bosak. Saying goodbye to a dog you've helped train from a puppy might be the toughest part, but you'll have the satisfaction of sending him or her on to a useful career.

To find service dog opportunities near you, Bosak suggests searching for an accredited service dog organization through Assistance Dogs International (assistancedogsinternational.org) and contacting them to ask about fostering.

For those who believe they could never foster a pet because it would be too hard to say goodbye when the pet is adopted, consider the alternative. You become an important part of the mission to save homeless pets by not only giving that individual animal hope, but also by making a difference for all animals. It may be hard to say goodbye to a dog after you've bonded with him or her, but it's important to remember that by opening your home, you are saving a life—and each pet you foster is a new life saved.

Author(s)



Jeanne Lee

<https://www.captrust.com/people/jeanne-lee/>

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