

**Animal Rescue League of Iowa**  
**Small Animal Foster Care Manual**  
**2022**

**Our Foster Mission:**

At the Animal Rescue League of Iowa, we know that lives are changed when people and animals come together. Many of those animals come to us broken in body and spirit. Our Mission is to make them healthy again, restore their trust in humans, and find them homes.

Providing young animals with opportunities to mature, sick or injured animals with opportunities to heal and un-socialized animals with the opportunities to develop trust in people away from the stress of the shelter environment, can often make the difference between success and failure.

Fostering is demanding work, both physically and emotionally. This manual is designed to help you deal with these challenges. We welcome your questions and comments regarding ways we might support you better. We look forward to working with you to provide happy endings for more and more animals.

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**Who to Call**

When it comes to animals, there are no silly questions. Please don't hesitate to ask. Call or e-mail us. (Email is the PREFERRED form of communication for non-emergency situations.)

For any questions related to your foster pet, your best first step is to email the ARL Foster Department. You can email Foster Supervisor, Amy Kopatich, at [akopatich@arl-iowa.org](mailto:akopatich@arl-iowa.org) or Foster Assistant, Tristan Haag, at [thaag@arl-iowa.org](mailto:thaag@arl-iowa.org). This dedicated team will point you in the right direction.

Once animals leave the shelter and enter foster care, they generally need to remain in foster care until approved by either the shelter veterinarian or medical staff. Please do not return your foster pet to the shelter without first coordinating with the foster department. This step assures proper record keeping, continuation of appropriate care, and allows our teams to be prepared for their arrival back to the shelter.

**Selection of foster caregivers:**

- All foster caregivers must complete a foster care application that will help the coordinator match foster caregivers with the appropriate animal for their lifestyle.
- All foster caregivers must sign the foster agreement and be capable of meeting the qualifications, duties, and time requirements.
- Foster caregivers should feel free to say no if they feel ill-equipped to deal with a particular situation if the time requirement is not convenient.
- Foster caregivers must be aware that the animals placed in foster care may be considered to be high risk. Sometimes, animals will not thrive and may die despite any life-saving measures attempted.
- Foster caregivers will be eligible for basic supplies such as enclosures, hides, bedding, treats and food if the shelter has supplies in stock. Please note that supplies are donation based. If we do not have it on hand, we will be unable to supply our fosters with those specific supplies. Your foster coordinators will be responsible for communicating this with you.
- Foster caregivers will receive any special food and all medications will be provided to them.
- Foster caregivers will understand that even with a complete and thorough check-in, foster animals may be placed in a foster home while still harboring unknown illnesses or parasites. Foster caregivers will understand that they are exposing their resident pets at their own risk.

### **Selection of Animals to be Fostered:**

The Animal Rescue League of Iowa's Foster Program is designed to serve at-risk animals that have a better chance of preparing for adoption away from the stress of the shelter environment.

- Animals are approved for foster by the ARL's Medical Department, Behavior Department, and Foster Department.
- All attempts are made to determine the behavior status of the animal prior to leaving the shelter.
- All attempts are made to determine the health status of the animal prior to leaving the shelter.
- Animals are vaccinated, de-wormed and vet checked when applicable prior to placement in foster care.
- No animals known to be "dangerous" will be fostered.
- Animals with known contagious diseases or behavior issues are fostered only with full disclosure to the caregiver.

### **Animals to be fostered (including, but not limited to):**

- Sick small animals
- Injured small animals
- Rabbits under 4 months
- Pregnant or nursing small animals
- Shy or un-socialized small animals
- Any small animal that may need respite from the shelter due to stress or length of stay

### **Basic Care**

All small animals should have fresh water available at all times. This is not a full description of care or safe foods for the following species. This is meant to serve as a guide. If you have any questions regarding the care of your small animal foster pet, please email your foster coordinators. If you are

questioning whether a food is safe to feed your foster pet, the safest thing is to not give it to them until additional information is obtained.

- ***Rabbits (herbivores)***

Rabbits should have a space or cage of their own within their foster home. This area should be large enough for and include bedding, a litter box, food dish, hay feeder, and enrichment. They should have enough room to stretch in every direction if desired. Under no circumstance should the bottom be grated or wire. Their diet is made up of pellets, veggies, fruits, and hay. (SEE PREGNANT RABBIT HANDOUT and RABBIT BASICS HANDOUT)

Safe Foods:

ALWAYS – A source of fresh clean water, Hay, a portion of rabbit food, most leafy greens, fresh and dried herb mixes, dandelion leaves, carrot tops, wild plants as long as correctly identified.

SOMETIMES – broccoli, cauliflower, spinach, celery, carrots, green beans.

TREATS – apple (without seeds), raspberries, strawberries, cucumber.

NEVER – dairy, apple seeds, meat, chocolate, citrus fruits, avocados, any houseplant, any plant that grows from a bulb, leeks/onions, iceberg lettuce and rhubarb

- ***Guinea Pigs (herbivores)***

Enclosure setups should include a hide, bedding of either fabric or small animal bedding, hay feeder and enrichment. Guinea pigs are crepuscular, meaning they are active most at dusk and dawn. They are herbivores that require a diet of leafy greens, veggies, fruits, pellets and hay. Like rabbits, they should never be housed in a grated bottom enclosure. (SEE PREGNANT GUINEA PIG HANDOUT and GUINEA PIG CARE HANDOUT)

Safe Foods:

ALWAYS – A source of fresh clean water, hay, a portion of guinea pig food, most leafy greens, fresh and dried herb mixes, dandelion leaves, wild plants as long as they are correctly identified.

SOMETIMES – broccoli, cauliflower, spinach, celery, carrots, green beans, tomatoes.

TREATS – apple (without seeds) raspberries, strawberries, cucumber, citrus fruits i.e Oranges.

NEVER – dairy, apple seeds, dried fruits, meat, chocolate, avocados, any houseplant, and plant grown from a bulb, leeks/onions, iceberg lettuce and rhubarb.

- ***Hamsters (omnivores)***

The enclosure for a hamster should include small animal bedding, one or more hides, and enrichment. They are crepuscular herbivores whose diet is made up of pellets, seeds, nuts, fruits, and veggies. The main difference between a hamster and gerbil enclosure is that hamsters need much more soft bedding in order for them to burrow. (SEE PREGNANT HAMSTER HANDOUT and HAMSTER BASICS HANDOUT)

Safe Foods:

ALWAYS – A source of fresh clean water, a portion of hamster food, a variety of green vegetables (asparagus, broccoli, cauliflower, carrots, celery, chard, sweet corn, kale, cress, courgette) Berries (black berries and raspberries) and stone fruits (plums, peaches – remove stones from stone fruits).

SOMETIMES – Squash, pumpkin, strawberries, banana, melon, cooked unsalted low-fat meats (e.g., chicken mince), low fat cottage cheese, cooked eggs, bread, grains, live crickets/mealworms.

TREATS – Low sugar or sugar free breakfast cereals, seeds and nuts (unsalted)

NEVER – Sweet almonds, apple seeds, chocolate, raw kidney beans, avocado, rhubarb, onions and leeks.

- ***Chinchillas (herbivores)***

A chinchilla enclosure should include vertical space where they can climb and perch, bedding, one or more hides, and enrichment. They are nocturnal animals who eat a diet of primarily pellets, seeds, fruits, veggies, and hay. They require dust baths to maintain healthy fur and should never be given an ordinary bath with soap and water. (SEE CHINCHILLA BASICS HANDOUT)

Safe Foods:

ALWAYS – A source of fresh clean water, hay, a portion of chinchilla food, dried herb mixes, dandelion leaves.

SOMETIMES – fresh herb mixes, fibrous leafy greens (kale, radicchio), carrots and celery.

TREATS – raisins (1 raisin once a week), dried cranberries (1 cranberry once a week), apple (without seeds), dried rosehips, blueberries and grapes.

NEVER – legumes, seeds, beans, whole peas, sugary fruits, banana, chocolate, meat/dairy products, avocado, chocolate.

- ***Ferrets***

Ferret enclosures should have two or more levels connected by ramps or stairs. They should include bedding, a litter box, shelves, hammocks, one or more hides, and enrichment. Ferrets need more exercise and mental stimulation than most small animals. Therefore, they should be given time out of their enclosure, in a safe play area, each day. Ferrets are obligate carnivores and their diets should consist of specially formulated ferret food with treats of small pieces of meat. (SEE FERRET BASICS HANDOUT)

- ***Gerbils (omnivores)***

The enclosure for a gerbil should include small animal bedding, one or more hides, and enrichment. They are crepuscular herbivores whose diet is made up of pellets, seeds, nuts, fruits, and veggies. (SEE PREGNANT GERBIL HANDOUT and GERBIL BASICS HANDOUT)

Safe Foods:

ALWAYS – A source of fresh clean water, a portion of gerbil food, hay/dried leaf mixes, some fresh leafy greens.

SOMETIMES – Pear, melon, apples (without seeds) orange, cucumber, carrot, pumpkin, fennel.

TREATS – Sunflower or pumpkin seeds, live insects.

NEVER – Grapes, rhubarb, apple seeds, dairy, meat, avocado, chocolate.

- ***Mice (omnivores)***

Mice enclosures should include small animal bedding, hides, and enrichment. Mice are nocturnal, meaning they are most active at night. They are omnivores and should eat pellets, fruits, veggies, and some meats. (SEE PREGNANT RAT HANDOUT \*rats and mice are very similar\* and MICE BASICS HANDOUT)

Safe Foods:

ALWAYS – a portion of mouse food, green leafy vegetables (broccoli, kale) crunchy fruits (apples without seeds, pears), peas, cooked grains.

SOMETIMES – Live insect food, cooked pasta, cooked meats, yogurt (soya rather than dairy).

TREATS – Low sugar cereal, store-bought treats, boiled egg, millet sprays and untreated applewood.

NEVER – chocolate, peanuts, citrus fruits, onions, raw meats, apple seeds, avocado.

- ***Rats (omnivores)***

Much like mice, rat enclosures should include small animal bedding, hides, and enrichment. They also need vertical space to climb. Rats are nocturnal, meaning they are most active at night. They are omnivores and should eat pellets, fruits, veggies, and some meats. (SEE PREGNANT RAT HANDOUT and RAT BASICS HANDOUT)

Safe Foods:

ALWAYS – A source of fresh clean water, a portion of rat food, leafy green vegetables, cooked grains, cooked legumes (never raw), fruits (no apple seeds or avocado) small amounts of cooked meats, low fat cottage cheese and cooked eggs.

SOMETIMES – Raw or cooked corn, beetroot, celery, lettuce, cucumber, spinach, radishes, live insects.

TREATS – Small amounts of no sugar added dried fruits, small amounts of toast, small amounts of yogurt (soya rather than dairy), low sugar baby food

NEVER – Citrus skin, uncooked dry beans and peanuts, mango, chocolate, poppy seeds, apple seeds, avocado, raw sweet potato, artichokes, dried corn, onions/leeks and rhubarb.

### **Common Diseases and Ailments**

- ***Bumble Foot***

Bumblefoot is a condition found in many caged small animals that causes inflamed calluses on the bottoms of their feet. The skin can sometimes rupture and create open sores that can cause many problems if not treated.

- ***Fleas***

There is no topical flea treatment or preventative for small animals. If you see any signs of live fleas on your foster pet, contact your foster coordinators promptly.

- ***Mites***

Mites are normally present in small numbers and do not cause any problems. The presence of mites is not an emergency situation. Excessive mites are generally presented as inflammation of the skin and increased scratching by your foster pet. If you feel as though your foster small animal is suffering from mites, please contact your foster coordinators for further guidance.

- ***Ringworm***

Ringworm is caused by a fungus, related to athlete's foot. On people and small animals, ringworm is most often shaped in a regular ring. The pet's fur will fall out, leaving a round bare spot with a visible ring. Ringworm causes little distress and is not an emergency, but it is contagious to cats, dogs, small animals and people. If you or your pets contract ringworm, you will need to seek treatment from your doctor and veterinarian (respectively). Everything the pet has touched while in your home will need to be disinfected with a bleach solution (at least 1 part bleach to 10 parts water) for at least one hour contact time, as ringworm spores can easily spread among other animals and re-infect their hosts. Speak with your foster coordinators for further instruction. \* If ringworm condition is confirmed, your home may be quarantined for 6 months in order to prevent continued contaminations. \*

- ***Upper Respiratory Infection***

Many small animals are at risk for a fairly common respiratory infection. This is often stress induced and very contagious to others of the same species. Upper respiratory symptoms include, but are not limited to: coughing, sneezing, runny nose, watery eyes, and congestion. As a general rule, when nasal discharge is clear your pet's cold is currently in the viral phase. We are unable to treat viruses with antibiotics. When the nasal discharge is yellow or green in color, your pet's cold is now in its bacterial phase. Our medical team may be able to prescribe antibiotics for your foster animal at this time. Contact your foster coordinator for guidance in the event you feel your foster pet has an upper respiratory infection.

- ***Masses or Tumors***

Tumors are a fairly common condition in small, caged pets. These can include types such as mammary, pituitary, and more. They can often be fast growing. Cysts are also common in these animals. If you notice a lump or growing mass on your foster pet, contact your foster coordinators promptly.

**When to contact the foster department:**

Contact the foster department in regards to any care related to foster pet(s). Contact your foster coordinators if you have questions regarding health, needing more medication, need to schedule return, vaccinations, etc. Your foster animals should never be taken to the shelter without a pre-scheduled appointment time. Please be aware that the medical department runs off of scheduled appointments. If you arrive without an appointment, you may have longer wait times as they will assist appointments before walk-ins.

Please contact the Foster Department at (515) 473-9108 or email Foster Supervisor Amy Kopatich [akopatich@arl-iowa.org](mailto:akopatich@arl-iowa.org) or Foster Assistant Tristan Haag at [thaag@arl-iowa.org](mailto:thaag@arl-iowa.org). Email is the best form of communication. The foster staff are generally in the building seven days a week between 9:00am and 7:00pm. They may be away from the immediate area, so, if possible, please send an email or leave a message.

**If the situation arises after these hours and you feel it is critical to talk to someone immediately, please call the emergency foster phone at 515-608-0393**

### **After Hours Emergency:**

The ARL utilizes Blue Pearl as our emergency, overnight vet clinic. If you are experiencing a medical emergency pertaining to your foster cat, please call the emergency foster phone (515-608-0393) for approval prior to transporting your foster cat to Blue Pearl. If you choose to take a foster animal to Blue Pearl or any other veterinary professional without approval from your foster coordinators, understand that you are doing so by incurring the cost yourself. The ARL will not reimburse outside routine or emergency vet visits.

Please see below for guidelines on what constitutes a medical emergency.

### **Medical Emergencies**

The following would always constitute a medical emergency that would require immediate veterinary assistance. If you experience the following during business hours, please contact your foster coordinators. If it is after hours, please call the emergency phone.

#### **- *Severe Trauma***

This may include being dropped, stepped on, etc. If your foster pet is showing signs of pain and distress, massive bleeding, or broken bones, it is important to contact your emergency number for assistance immediately. If your foster pet is bleeding profusely, attempt to slow or stop the bleeding with a pressure bandage if the cat will allow it. If broken bones are suspected, contact the emergency number before moving the animal. Remember that a pet in pain will sometimes react aggressively in certain situations. Please use caution when handling a pet with any sort of suspected injury.

#### **- *Unconscious or Unresponsive***

If your foster pet is unresponsive to outside stimuli (you are unable to “wake” them) or appear to be unconscious, please contact your foster coordinators or emergency number immediately.

#### **- *Labored Breathing***

If your foster pet appears to be struggling to breathe, is taking shallow, labored breaths, or breathing irregularly, this may be indicative of a medical emergency. Please contact your foster coordinators for further guidance.

#### **- *Ingestion of Known or Suspected Toxin or Poison***

In the situation that you suspect or can confirm your foster pet has ingested something that may be poisonous or toxic, contact your foster coordinators immediately. Be sure to have the name of the toxin you suspect available so you are able to inform your foster coordinators and the vet. A picture of the label may be helpful in this situation.

**What if my foster animal bites or scratches someone or another animal?** Foster Caregivers are required to report any unusual aggressive behavior or any bite or serious scratch that breaks the skin. Iowa law mandates that any dog, cat, or ferret that bites must be placed on a 10-day quarantine for rabies observation.

**\*THIS ONLY APPLIES TO FERRETS IN FOSTER, NO OTHER SMALL ANIMALS ARE REQUIRED TO SERVE A BITE QUARANTINE\***

### **If a bite occurs:**

- Clean and flush the wound immediately with soap and water
- Consult your physician for further instructions
- Report the incident to the foster team as soon as possible. They will complete a “Bite Form and Incident Report”
- The animal will be scheduled to be seen by the ARL medical team and will remain at the shelter for the duration of the **10-day** quarantine period as directed by Iowa law
- This incident will not be seen as a “mark against this animal”. Following the mandatory quarantine, this animal will be assessed by our behavior team to determine a individual plan for the animal in order to set them up for success in the future and to prevent similar incidents.
- This incident will not be seen as a “mark against the foster”. Your foster coordinators would like to speak with you about the incident in order to use it as a learning and teaching resource. The ARL understands accidents happen and would like to work with foster caregivers to prevent similar incidents from happening in the future.

### **If a bite is not reported:**

- It creates a hazard for others handling that animal. An animal that has bitten once is usually less inhibited in biting a second time.
- If the animal is rabid, it could mean the death of the bitten individual.

### **Commonly Asked Questions**

- *What if my foster pet gets out or goes missing?*

In the event that your foster pet goes missing at any time, please inform the foster department. They will be able to assist in the search and let other agencies know that we are missing that animal, should it turn up at another shelter or rescue. The ARL understands animals get lost. Along with that, we do not blame the caregiver for any incident like this.

- *What if my foster animal gets sick?*

Please see the section on Common Diseases and Medical Emergencies. Contact your foster department with any further questions or concerns.

- *Are foster animals ever euthanized?*

Much energy, love, time and veterinary care are devoted to animals in foster care, and the shelter is committed to finding homes for ALL of these animals. Foster caregivers can feel confident that the shelter will not euthanize any animal unless it becomes seriously ill or injured and is suffering. If no viable medical treatment is available or the animal poses a threat either through contagion or behavior, the animal may be euthanized. All attempts will be made to provide foster caregivers with honesty and compassion in these situations.

Communicate any concerns regarding your foster animal with your foster coordinators. We cannot help if we do not know what is happening.

- *What happens after I agree to foster a small animal(s)?*

After replying to a foster shoutout and committing to foster an animal, you will schedule a time to pick up that foster animal. Care instructions, special equipment, special food, and medications will be supplied at the time of pick up.

- ***What if I cannot continue to care for my foster animal?***

Do not worry – if you must return the foster animal, we will continue the care of the animal either in the shelter or in another approved foster home. Caregivers who cannot fulfill the entire foster commitment are asked to contact the Foster Department as soon as possible so that other arrangements can be made. Foster animals must remain in the immediate care of the appointed foster caregiver. Leaving a foster animal in anyone else's care, unless specific arrangements have been approved by your foster coordinators, is prohibited.

- ***Can I say no to fostering a specific small animal or type of small animal?***

Please say no if you do not feel it is a good time for you to care for a foster animal. The program is designed to provide the best experience for both the animal and the caregiver. Often after a difficult experience with high risk foster animal, you may need a break. Please do not feel obligated to agree to a specific foster. We ask and encourage you to be honest with us and know your own limits. There will always be another opportunity to foster.

- ***What are the time commitments?***

Each animal is different; therefore, each foster circumstance will reflect this. Time commitment and responsibilities depend upon the situation and animal. It will be the responsibility of your foster coordinators to give you a time estimate on each fostering time commitment, to the best of their ability. As a general guideline, this is what you can expect:

- Pregnant rats: 9 weeks
- Pregnant mice: 7 weeks
- Pregnant hamsters: 6 weeks
- Pregnant gerbils: 9 weeks
- Pregnant guinea pigs: 13 weeks
- Pregnant sugar gliders: 10 weeks
- Shelter Rabbit Getaway: in foster for a minimum of 1 week unless adopted prior to the end of the first week
- Fearful, shy, or under-socialized small animals: dependent on behavioral progress

\* Please communicate with your foster coordinator if you believe there is any reason your foster animal will not be cleared for their next step toward an adoptive home (illness, behavior concerns, etc.) \*

- ***How do I know when to return my foster animal?***

At the time you pick up your foster animal a tentative date should be determined. This is an estimate because all animals are different. You will need to communicate with your foster coordinators in order to schedule an appointment to return your foster animal. Please do not show up without scheduling an appointment with your foster coordinators prior. Our staff need a chance to prepare for your arrival. If you arrive without an appointment, you may have longer wait times as they will assist appointments before walk-ins.

- ***How do I know when to bring my foster animal in for a checkup?***

Your foster coordinators will be the point of contact for scheduling all checkups for your foster animal. If you feel as though an upcoming vaccination appointment or medication appointment has yet to be scheduled, please contact the foster department promptly.

- ***Can my foster animal(s) come with me on vacation?***

No foster pet will be approved to go on vacation with their foster caregiver at any time for any duration of time. The ARL requires its fostered animals to remain within a 45-minute radius of the Main location. This is in case of any emergency situation that may arise. Under no circumstance should an ARL animal cross state lines without explicit approval and proper documentation from the transport department.

- ***Who do I contact if I have behavior concerns or questions regarding my foster animal?***

Contact your foster coordinators with any questions or concerns in regards to your foster animal's behavior. They will communicate with the appropriate teams in order to provide you with any necessary and applicable information for your foster animal.

If you feel that your foster animal's behavior is aggressive or dangerous in any way, contact the foster department immediately for further instruction.

- ***What is a VIP and who can place a VIP on my foster animal?***

To the ARL, a VIP is someone interested in adopting an animal once that animal is deemed available for adoption in accordance with our protocols and standards.

Anyone may place a VIP on any small animal in foster, including foster families, friends of the foster, and members of the public who have seen or met these felines.

The VIP will be contacted if and when the animal becomes available for adoption. The foster caregiver should contact the foster department to place a VIP for any animal in foster. The foster caregiver should be prepared with the interested adopter's name, phone number, email address, and address.