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Weekend Getaways: A Lifesaving Short-Term Foster Care Program

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Shelter dogs can vacation too! Participants in our animal shelter's Weekend Getaway program are provided with a much-needed break from the kennel, fresh scenery, and new friends to meet — both furry and non-furry. Weekend Getaways have increased foster volunteer involvement at our shelter, provided an outlet to gather behavioral observation data, and directly impacted the lives of shelter dogs experiencing kennel-induced stress. I've written this article as a guide for establishing a Weekend Getaway foster program at your shelter.

Benefits

Research sponsored by Maddie's Fund and conducted at Carroll College found that **short-term foster "sleepovers" significantly reduced stress in shelter dogs**. The primary goals of the Weekend Getaway program are to immediately reduce kennel-related stress in a shelter dog and to gather constructive observations of the pet's behavior patterns in a home.

Is the shelter dog good with cats? Children? Other dogs? The next door neighbor? In an environment where most of the shelter dogs' histories are limited at best, observations a short-term foster family can make are invaluable to shelter adoption counselors, volunteers, and staff.

Not only does this program offer an opportunity to gather behavior observations, but many of the observations, photographs, and video gathered in foster care can be used in marketing and adoption promotions. An animal shelter can easily provide staff-moderated social media groups that allow foster parents to share their foster adventures and submit marketing material. Who knows; that picture of a shelter dog on the beach with the wind blowing in his fur could be the reason he is adopted so quickly!

In addition to reducing stress and finding the shelter dogs' star qualities, Weekend Getaways allow foster parents to step foot in the world of fostering dogs without committing to a seemingly daunting four- to



eight-week engagement that some programs require. An added bonus: Most Weekend Getaways turn into longer foster engagements than originally planned! Foster parents, enamored with their foster dog, have repeatedly postponed their return dates to the shelter or even adopted their forever friend as a result of this program.



This picture of Chester sporting his sunglasses during a Weekend Getaway caught his forever family's eye

Implementation

Staff commitment

The Weekend Getaway program is easily implemented by one staff member. Time should be allotted for posting eligible dogs on social media, meeting foster parents, communicating with foster parents, and preparing supplies, though this may be done in advance to prepare for future engagements and to streamline pickup appointments.

Selecting dogs

Select and post eligible Weekend Getaway dogs to a foster parent social media page once weekly. You may utilize the *Secret Group* and *Topic* functions on Facebook, for example, to restrict who can see the content. All prospective foster parents should be added to this page following foster orientation and should be instructed to watch the page regularly for foster needs.

Dogs should be selected based on a variety of factors, including the presence of kennel-induced stress, length of stay, behavioral deterioration, or lack of a complete behavioral history. There is no limit to the number of dogs you can post! The urgency of the behaviorally deteriorating dogs should be clearly stated in the social media post, though having several options encourages foster parent involvement and offers an assortment of dogs who may be more suitable for a foster parent's household. *It is important to note that dogs with advanced aggression are not eligible for this program.*

Photographs of candidate dogs should be posted in their Weekend Getaway announcements, though video footage directly uploaded to social media is more

attention-grabbing as it begins to automatically play on the foster parent's screen. If available, select pictures and video of the shelter dog that best showcase their behavior with people and other dogs. Playgroup pictures and video footage provide the ideal material to promote interest. You want the potential foster parent to visualize that dog spending time in their home!

Preparing supplies

Weekend Getaway foster supplies should be issued once weekly to foster parents who take home a shelter dog, or as needed. Include these items in your Weekend Getaway package:

- Prescribed medication
- Walking equipment (leash, harness, collar, head halter, etc.)
- Identification tag (fitted to the dog's collar)
- Bowls
- Food
- Toys
- Crate
- Bedding
- Reusable shopping bag — consider using personalized canvas bags that promote your foster program!

Pick-up

Meet-and-greets with foster parents and their resident dogs (if applicable) to pick up the shelter dog should be scheduled in advance once weekly. As everyone's "weekend" or days off vary, remain flexible for appointments with foster parents. This program should not be solely limited to Saturdays and Sundays.

Dog- dog interactions at the shelter are certainly not a requirement, but they can be offered to foster parents who are hesitant about introducing a new dog to their resident dog(s) at home. Share the shelter dog's playgroup behavior with the foster parent, though advise them that this behavior may change in the home environment. Additionally, provide foster parents with instructions to separate the shelter dog from their resident

pets for feeding and in the event of an altercation or strained interactions.

Communication

Communication with foster parents regarding their shelter dog should be available as needed. Provide foster parents with contact information for shelter behavior staff, medical staff, and emergency clinics should an emergency occur after hours.

Communication channels may be available for foster parents by phone, email, and social media messaging. During the Weekend Getaway, foster parents should be reminded to upload their pictures and videos of their foster dog to social media. This allows shelter staff to readily access the content for use in marketing.

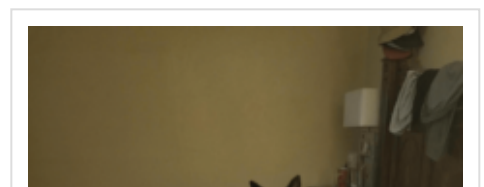
Drop-off

Schedule an appointment time with the foster parent to return the shelter dog from their Weekend Getaway. When the dog returns, remind the foster parent to return any reusable supplies and to complete a Foster Report Card form detailing in-home behavior observations. Foster Report Cards can ask questions about the shelter dog's experiences with adults, children, and other animals, and about the shelter dog's house training, crate training, and obedience skills. Fun questions about the shelter dog's favorite toy, treat, and place to sleep can also be included! The card should include a section to report any other observations they deem valuable. The Foster Report Card may then be uploaded to the dog's file and saved for reference when staff is providing adoption counseling for that dog.

If you have a spare moment to do so, send out an email message to adoption counselor staff and volunteers with pictures from that dog's foster engagement along with the completed Foster Report Card. When a potential adopter comes to the shelter asking for a kid-friendly, house-trained dog, your counselors will be able to more readily recall this information and make a match accordingly.

Success stories

Smiley Walter was a 5-year-old male pit bull-type dog who was transported to our animal shelter from our local animal services agency. He tested positive for



heartworm and was provided with treatment through our shelter's medical department. During Walter's medical treatment, he became eligible for the Weekend Getaway program. We had no knowledge of Walter's prior behavioral history, as he had originally found his way to the animal services agency as a stray.

A foster parent quickly jumped at the opportunity to welcome Walter into her home for a Weekend Getaway. While in foster care, we learned that Walter was a friendly ambassador with dogs both large and small, children, cats, and cockatiels!

Beloved by the foster parent and family members, Walter's Weekend Getaway extended to an eight-day foster engagement. Following his return to the shelter, Walter was available for a mere eight days before finding his forever family —complete with resident dogs and children. Adoption counselors were able to make a reliable match for Walter based on the information we had just learned the week prior. Walter continues to enjoy his forever home and sends us regular updates.

Chester was a 4-year-old male pit bull-type mix who was also transported to our facility from an animal services agency. Upon arrival, Chester presented with several stress-induced behaviors including barrier aggression and sensitivity to handling. He would



Walter relaxing on his foster parent's bed with his two foster "sisters"



Chester sleeping on his foster parent's bed

often present as catatonic due to his discomfort. In addition to his behavioral hurdles, both of Chester's eyes required extensive medical attention. We conducted onsite playgroups at the shelter, which helped him, though nothing launched Chester's behavioral progress as quickly as his Weekend

Wit



h easy-to-implement strategies, a Weekend Getaway program can be launched at your animal shelter, animal services agency, or rescue. I hope this article allowed you to draw some inspiration for what will benefit your own foster program. The Walters and Chesters of the world will thank you!



Chester playing with a small dog in the foster home

Heather Gibbs holds credentials as a Certified Professional Dog Trainer -Knowledge Assessed through the CCPDT and a Shelter Behavior Affiliate designation through the IAABC. She currently manages the Behavior Department at the Humane Society of Pinellas in Clearwater, Florida, where she uses reward-based training methods for shelter dogs and cats, supported by the latest scientific research.



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