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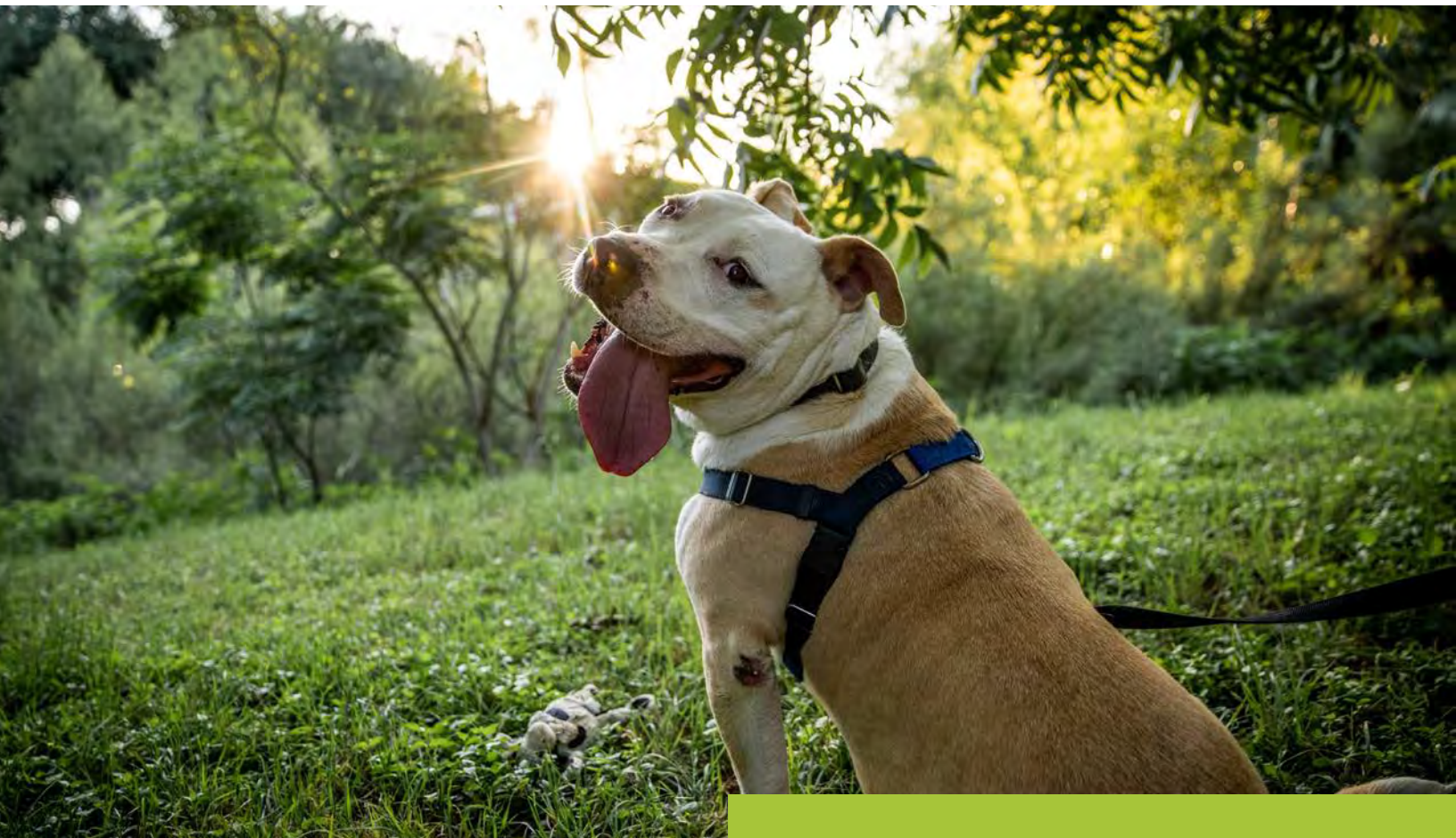


THE VIRTUAL FOSTER PROGRAM

A Guide to Advocacy for Shelter Animals

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WHAT IS A VIRTUAL FOSTER?

A Virtual Foster is a volunteer who wants to give long-stay dogs an opportunity to shine while they wait in a shelter setting for their forever homes.

Austin Pets Alive!'s (APA!'s) successful Virtual Foster Program discovered that by pairing dedicated volunteers with dogs who have been in shelter the longest, we

can provide a clear, targeted approach to advocate for their adoption.

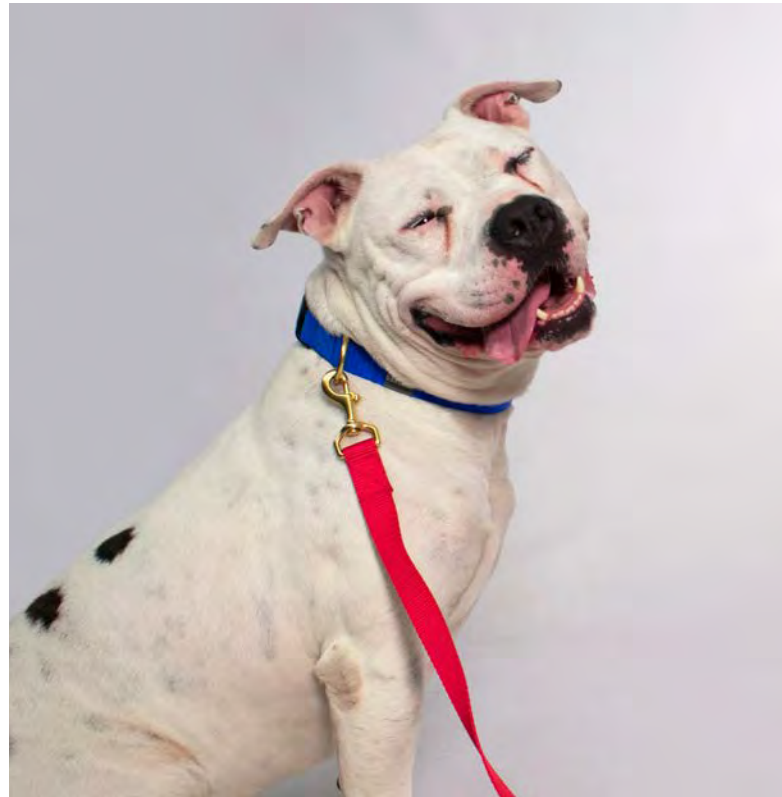
When a shelter dog has a Virtual Foster, they receive many of the benefits a foster home would offer, while the dog still resides at the shelter. Virtual Fosters become experts at advocating for their assigned dog and provide essential care and attention to help their dogs thrive. Longer stay dogs often do not show as well in their kennels and Virtual Fosters champion their assigned dog(s) best qualities.

An ideal Virtual Foster is a highly proactive, devoted volunteer who is dedicated to reducing the length of stay for adoptable dogs. The more time a Virtual Foster can spend with their assigned dog, the better they will know their personalities, identify shifts in behavior or medical issues, and help improve the dog's overall wellness while it is in the shelter. The Virtual Foster becomes the point person for information on that dog, coordinating with various shelter staff on necessary treatments, and providing training to help the dog succeed in life beyond the shelter.

VIRTUAL FOSTER PROGRAM

A Virtual Foster Program is designed to provide guidelines, training, and support to volunteer Virtual Fosters on how to advocate for dogs residing in a shelter setting. Shelter staff provide the Virtual Foster with all available information on their assigned dog(s) so that they can understand how to work with the dog, interact with support teams at the shelter (such as behavior, medical, foster, and adoption staff), and advocate for their assigned dog(s) to the community and potential adopters.

The goal of this program is to create a relationship between the dog and the Virtual Foster that will serve the dog in all ways that facilitate placement in a home. This relationship will provide a deeper understanding of the dog so that potential adopters can make a more informed decision about successfully welcoming this furry friend into their home.



VIRTUAL FOSTER COORDINATOR

The Virtual Foster Program at APA! is run by a full-time Virtual Foster Coordinator, who oversees all areas of the program and provides insight, guidance, and support for any needs Virtual Foster volunteers may have while working with their assigned dog(s). The Virtual Foster Coordinator identifies long-stay dogs within the shelter and matches them with virtual foster volunteers to advocate for their adoption. These matches are determined by the

Virtual Foster's dog handling skill level, behavioral or medical knowledge, and ability to communicate effectively with potential adopters.

The Virtual Foster Coordinator streamlines communication between Virtual Fosters and the behavior, foster, adoptions, and medical teams, while guiding Virtual Fosters to training and skill-building programs that will help them advocate appropriately for their assigned dog(s). The Virtual Foster Coordinator is also responsible for managing all documentation about the dogs in the program (see page 13, Measurable Data).

BUILDING A NEW TEAM

There is nothing better than building a community that works well together, especially when it comes to advocating for shelter dogs. When building a new program, it is most effective for the Virtual Foster Coordinator to work with the shelter's Volunteer Program to recruit existing volunteers to become Virtual Fosters. It is especially helpful to recruit volunteers with experience in handling/walking/training dogs in the shelter setting.

Once the program is established, it is recommended that the Virtual Foster Coordinator pair new Virtual Fosters with more experienced volunteers to provide mentorship and team building. Seasoned Virtual Fosters can show new volunteers the ropes, help with content creation ideas, share training techniques, and provide a morale boost.

The Virtual Foster Coordinator can also facilitate safe, fun gatherings for the Virtual Fosters and their assigned dogs to meet their teammates.

PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS

WHO CAN BECOME A VIRTUAL FOSTER?

All approved Virtual Fosters must meet the following criteria before working with a dog in the Virtual Foster Program.

- Be available to work with assigned dog(s) at least 2-3 times per week
- Successfully complete training through the volunteer dog walking/handling program
- Work only with dogs in approved behavior group
- Be aware of shelter's policies and philosophies on dog handling, training, and behavior strategies
- Create visual content (photos/videos) and compelling, written biography to be shared on social media
 - Virtual Foster dogs have their own Instagram accounts for marketing to potential adopters
 - Virtual Foster must be up-to-date on social media posting guidelines
- Commit to communicating with the Virtual Foster Coordinator on a regular basis
 - Have one active email address to receive regular communications
 - Have a cell phone number where the volunteer can be reached fairly quickly in case of adoption inquiries



The Virtual Foster Program will provide targeted guidance to Virtual Fosters on how to promote dogs, create winning bios, and effective social media content.



ONBOARDING

When a volunteer joins the Virtual Foster Team, the Virtual Foster Coordinator will provide the relevant links/data needed to understand and embody the shelter's behavior, medical, marketing, and communication strategies. The Virtual Foster Coordinator will also provide access to the shelter's support programs and staff points-of-contact for pictures and videos that can be added to the dog's online adoption profile.

The Virtual Foster Coordinator will provide Virtual Fosters with all relevant information pertaining to their assigned dog, including notes from the dog's previous owners or transferring shelter, behavioral information, medical issues, and staff recommendations for strengthening skills through training.

Raising awareness about long stay dogs to the community is a critical component of the program. Virtual Fosters will receive training on how to communicate what they know about their assigned dogs to both shelter staff and the community at large, particularly through posts on social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook. These platforms allow staff, the community, and potential adopters to see the dogs through the Virtual Foster's eyes.

WAYS FOR VIRTUAL FOSTERS TO INTERACT WITH ASSIGNED DOGS

Varying time spent between training, enrichment, and field trips will allow Virtual Fosters to get a sense of the

dog outside of the shelter setting. Below are suggestions for outings that will give long-stay dogs a range of experiences and provide crucial information about how the dog responds to a variety of stimuli.

- Walks around the shelter or hikes off-site*
- Field trips to outdoor restaurants, shopping plazas, or sight-seeing*
- Sleepovers at Virtual Foster's residence
- Obedience or agility training, depending on the Virtual Foster's comfort level

*Please note that all public interactions should have the dog on-leash at all times





SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

Marketing a shelter dog well is a cornerstone of effectively advocating for their adoption. Creating compelling content is invaluable for drawing interest from potential adopters. When a dog has quality media content (pictures, videos, social media posts), inquiries come in. Public facing platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok offer the opportunity to show off long-stay

dogs, create unique content, and build an audience for that dog. Even if a social media follower cannot adopt the dog, the more they learn about the dog, the more likely they are to share the posts with other potential adopters.

At the 2-3 week mark, Virtual Fosters should have a pretty clear sense of their assigned dog's personality and preferences to share with the community. Suggestions for characteristics to focus on in brief social media posts are the dog's:

- Relaxed demeanor outside of kennels
- Preferred home type (active, laid back, somewhere in between)
- Nicknames
- Personality (funny, playful, quiet, snuggly, etc.)
- Interactions with other animals and humans
- Motivators (food, people, toys, etc.)
- Training mastered or in progress

INSTAGRAM

Create an individual account for the dog and curate a gallery of images that present the dog in the best light. Frame the dog as a friend or part of the family, and not a dog in a shelter. Posts can be shared by the shelter's official account and by other followers to get the word out. A link to the IG profile can also be shared to the dog's adoption page.

FACEBOOK

The Virtual Foster can share stories and photos with the Marketing Team to be shared on the shelter's official Facebook page, and perhaps cross-posted with other groups in the area.

TWITTER

Photos, videos, and brief introductions can be posted to the shelter's official Twitter page, with links to the dog's adoption page for interested adopters to learn more.

TIK TOK

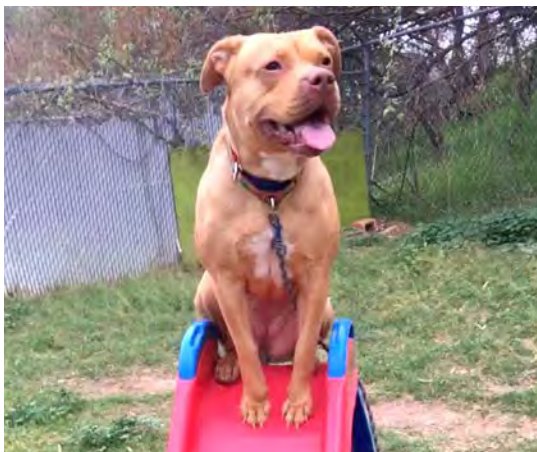
TikTok is a great way to create edited videos with music and graphics to highlight the long-stay dog's adventures with their Virtual Foster. For those ambitious enough, there are plenty of trends to jump in on to gain more attention for adoptable pups!

If the Virtual Foster does not feel well versed in social media, the Virtual Foster Coordinator can participate in content creation or connect the Virtual Foster with the appropriate contacts on the shelter's Marketing Team.

If a long-stay dog has more than one Virtual Foster assigned to it, they can also split the workload, with one person fielding adopter inquiries and the other handling social media.

WHAT MAKES A GREAT PHOTO/VIDEO

- Natural lighting
- Clear image
- Vibrant colors
- Background outside the shelter setting
- Pictures/videos with people the dog knows well/is comfortable with
- Capturing aspects of the dog's personality
- For video, capturing authentic moments of play or tenderness
- Fun or sweet stories to match the image
- Inexpensive themed photo shoots
 - "Who Wore it Better" campaign
 - Wall of Hearts / Valentine's Day Kissing Booth
 - Spring Bunny Visit or Egg Hunt
 - Bubbles and Beach Balls
 - Autumn Pumpkin Patch
 - Holiday Present Opening



COMMUNICATING WITH POTENTIAL ADOPTERS

It is important to provide Virtual Fosters with guidelines for how to communicate with potential adopters, whether out in the community during field trips, through social media contact, or via adoption inquiries. These guidelines will ensure that Virtual Fosters use shelter-approved language and that they feel confident in answering most questions quickly and efficiently. The Virtual Foster Coordinator can also provide coaching or practice conversations if an individual Virtual Foster still feels nervous about speaking with potential adopters.

GUIDELINES FOR SPEAKING WITH POTENTIAL ADOPTERS

1. Initial responses (whether online or in person) should have a professional, welcoming tone. The primary goal is to find a good home for each dog, so it's important not to intimidate potential adopters right off the bat.
2. Aim for an honest, positive communication when discussing any dog's home needs, history, or behavior. Do not hide potential challenges, but remember to share ways the adopter can overcome or work with those challenges in a positive way.
3. Avoid a "canned" email response and try to address each of the person's questions directly. Your initial correspondence should have three goals:
 - a) Provide a brief overview of the dog, sharing why this dog is special.
 - b) Gather key details from the adopter that will help you determine if their home is an appropriate fit for the dog.
 - c) Keep your emails brief, upbeat, and get targeted answers to any info you may need.



FROM INQUIRY TO ADOPTION

It is important to offer samples or guides on how Virtual Fosterers should interact with potential adopters, from initial inquiries to the adoption process. Since they will be the point person for their assigned dog(s), this will ensure that they feel confident when communicating with potential adopters.

Here is an example of an appropriate introductory email from a Virtual Fosterer to a potential adopter:

Thank you for your inquiry about Fido. My name is _____ and I am Fido's advocate. Through working with Fido, I've learned that he would prefer to be an "only dog," but he's such an amazing companion that you won't need anyone else. Fido is a little shy at first, but it is well worth the wait once he warms up to you.

If you can tell me a bit about you and your home, it would be helpful in determining if you and Fido are a good match. Do you live by yourself? If not, how many people are in your home (and what are their ages)? If you're in an apartment, what floor are you on? Do you use an elevator? If you're renting, please check whether there are any weight or breed restrictions, so you know you're free to fall in love with this awesome pup.

Whatever info you can share will help, and then we can set up time to talk via phone prior to an in-person introduction with Fido.

After the introductory email, the Virtual Fosterer will conduct a phone interview where they can share more details about the dog and ask more detailed questions, and then if it seems like a good fit, they will arrange a meeting with the adoptable dog.

WORD CHOICE

The biggest question most Virtual Fosters have is how to describe a dog that has behavioral and/or medical challenges. Careful word choice can set the tone for a productive conversation. It is important to make sure we are not deceiving potential adopters by withholding information, but also setting the dog up for a successful adoption by providing clear, consistent, and unbiased language.

Examples:

- Instead of “aggressive,” you can use “reactive.”
- Rather than “defensive,” you can say “prefers to socially distance.”
- Instead of “high energy” or “hyper,” you can say “enthusiastic.”
- Rather than “fearful,” you can use “takes time to get to know you.”

Honesty and context are a Virtual Foster’s best friends when trying to place a dog. The more genuine and relatable, the more potential adopters will trust the information you are giving them.

MEET-AND-GREETS

Since Virtual Foster dogs reside at the shelter, it is important to set up meet-and-greets with input from adoption staff. In the same ways that Virtual Fosters would need permission to take a dog on a field trip or sleep over, the same would go for taking the dog off-site to meet a potential adopter. If the meet-and-greet takes place at the shelter, engaging the adoption team for the visit is also advised. Set a policy that is similar to your shelter’s Foster Program.

ADOPTIONS

If the meet-and-greet goes well, and the individual would like to pursue adoption, Virtual Fosters can guide them to the appropriate application process for your shelter, but the official adoption should be finalized by shelter staff. Since the adopter will have the Virtual Foster’s contact information from the initial inquiry, they can choose to be an additional resource after adoption, sharing any insights or tips on the dog they know so well.

MEASURABLE DATA

To demonstrate the impact of the Virtual Foster Program, all dogs should be tracked using a variety of information (preferably in spreadsheet form) by the Virtual Foster Coordinator.

SUGGESTED TRACKING CATEGORIES

- Demographics (age, breed, size, origin, medical/behavioral challenges)
- Date of program intake (# of dogs admitted to the program)
- # of adoption inquiries per dog
- Date of program outcome (# of dogs graduated from the program/adopted)
- Length of stay prior to joining the program
- Length of stay while in the program
- Hyperlinks to the dog's profiles in animal database
- Hyperlinks to bios, pictures, social media posts/profiles

The above categories make it possible to track program metrics, such as:

- # of dogs admitted to the program
- # of dogs graduated from the program/adopted
- Avg length of stay once in the program
- # of new dogs/Virtual Fosters added to the program (daily/monthly/annually)
- Whether dogs need bios or media content on the website or social media channels
- # of dogs with a Virtual Foster that have gone to live with a foster caregiver
- % of dogs onsite that have a Virtual Foster

PROGRAM TESTIMONIALS AT APA!

SIR GEORGE & SARAH

“Talking to potential adopters has been such a great learning experience. It’s invaluable when it comes to placing the dog in the right home. After getting to know the dog so well, you feel confident about talking to people about all the wonderful things you know about them. You also find your way when you have to explain more challenging behaviors. When you know they really understand, and then you’re able to introduce them, and show off the dog’s potential, it makes a huge difference for the dogs! I wasn’t sure



how to do it all at first, but with this program, I learned how to speak about more complex behaviors in a way that wouldn’t put someone off, if they were the right fit. And then, of course, the Virtual Fosters know and love the dogs for their better qualities and can talk about them better than anyone else!”

Thank you to the Pedigree Foundation for their generous support of Austin Pets Alive!'s Virtual Foster Program!



Austin Pets Alive! is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization dedicated to providing the resources, education, and programs needed to eliminate the killing of companion animals.

Please visit austinpetsalive.org for more information.

