![Maddie's Fund — The Duffield Foundation logo]

2024 SURVEY REPORT
DOG & CAT FOSTER CARE IN THE UNITED STATES

Executive Summary

The 2024 survey by Maddie's Fund® provides valuable insights into the use of foster care programs for dogs and cats across the United States. The survey reveals continued growth in foster care programs and the number of active foster caregivers. Despite this progress, some organizations face challenges in expanding their foster programs, including difficulties finding suitable foster homes, limited staff resources, funding constraints, and liability concerns.

One of the most notable findings of the 2024 survey is the positive impact of streamlined onboarding processes. Many organizations have become more efficient in onboarding new foster caregivers, significantly reducing wait times. As a result, caregivers can begin fostering more quickly, which is associated with more pets placed in foster care. This focus on efficiency has helped organizations maximize their foster care capacity, providing more animals with temporary homes.

The survey also highlights the influence of foster application requirements on program success. Requirements involving direct, personal evaluations—such as home visits, meeting household members, and meeting household pets—were found to reduce both the number of pets placed in foster care and the number of active caregivers, suggesting that organizations may benefit from carefully evaluating their foster application processes and minimizing time-consuming requirements.

Social media emerged as a critical tool for promoting foster programs and connecting with potential caregivers. Organizations that maintained a strong, consistent presence on social media—specifically on Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok—were more successful in placing pets in foster care. The survey found a clear relationship between higher social media posting frequency and increased foster placements, emphasizing the importance of digital engagement in modern foster care programs.

Overall, the 2024 survey provides a clear picture of the evolving foster care landscape, highlighting the importance of efficient processes and active community engagement. These insights can help organizations strengthen foster care programs, overcome barriers, and provide more animals with safe, temporary homes.

Background

Foster care programs are vital in providing temporary homes and care for needy animals. These programs are essential for ensuring animals' well-being and supporting animal welfare organizations' work. To gain insights into the utilization and support of foster care programs, Maddie's Fund has conducted a biannual survey in the United States. This report focuses on the findings from the survey conducted in 2024, as well as trends observed when comparing the data to previous years. **Please respect Maddie's Fund's data sharing policy and seek permission before sharing any survey results.**

Methods

In early 2025, Maddie's Fund conducted an online survey to gather valuable insights about the foster activities of physical shelters and foster-based organizations in 2024. The survey aimed to collect information on various aspects, such as the number of pets taken in, the number of pets placed in foster care, and the process of selecting foster caregivers.

The survey was distributed via the email lists of multiple national organizations involved in animal welfare, including Maddie's Fund, ASPCA, The Association for Animal Welfare Advancement, AdoptaPet.com, Best Friends Animal Society, Humane World For Animals and Maddie's Million Pet Challenge. Organizations that completed the survey were eligible to win one of ten $500 grants as an incentive for participation.

After removing duplicate and ineligible responses, a total of 1,423 participating organizations provided answers to the survey. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the survey findings, providing a clear overview of the data. Statistical tests were employed to analyze changes over time and assess relationships between variables, enabling meaningful comparisons across years and identifying significant patterns within the data.

Limitations

It is essential to approach the findings of this survey with specific considerations in mind, as the data collected has certain limitations. Firstly, distributing the survey via email lists of specific organizations may limit representation, as the participating organizations might not entirely reflect all animal welfare organizations. Additionally, slight changes in the wording of survey questions compared to previous years could have influenced how respondents understood and answered them, and could affect the comparability of data between different survey years.

Furthermore, the survey relied on self-reported information from the person most familiar with participating organizations' policies and structure. While they were encouraged to provide accurate reporting, errors or inconsistencies are still possible due to human error or subjective interpretation. Nonetheless, the survey provides valuable insights into the utilization and support of foster care programs and offers a basis for understanding trends and potential areas for improvement in the field.

Organization Profiles

The participating organizations consisted of various types of entities involved in animal welfare. For this report, however, we focus on two primary groups: physical shelters and foster-based organizations. This framework allows us to explore trends and findings based on the distinct operational realities of each, particularly in the context of foster care programs.

Physical shelters include government organizations with a physical shelter (20%), private non-profit organizations with a government contract (21%), and private non-profit organizations without a government contract (59%). In 2024, a total of 963 organizations were physical shelters. This distribution has remained consistent across the 2018, 2020, 2022, and 2024 survey years, with no statistically significant changes over time. Foster-based organizations refer to private, non-profit organizations that do not have a physical shelter. In 2024, 451 foster-based organizations participated in the survey.

Foster Care Landscape in Physical Shelters: Intake, Programs, and Utilization

This section provides an overview of the foster care landscape in physical shelters, examining critical aspects such as pet intake for dogs and cats, the availability of foster care programs, and why some shelters lack such programs. It also explores foster care placement patterns, the support provided to foster caregivers, and the use of caregiver roster audits to maintain active volunteer pools.
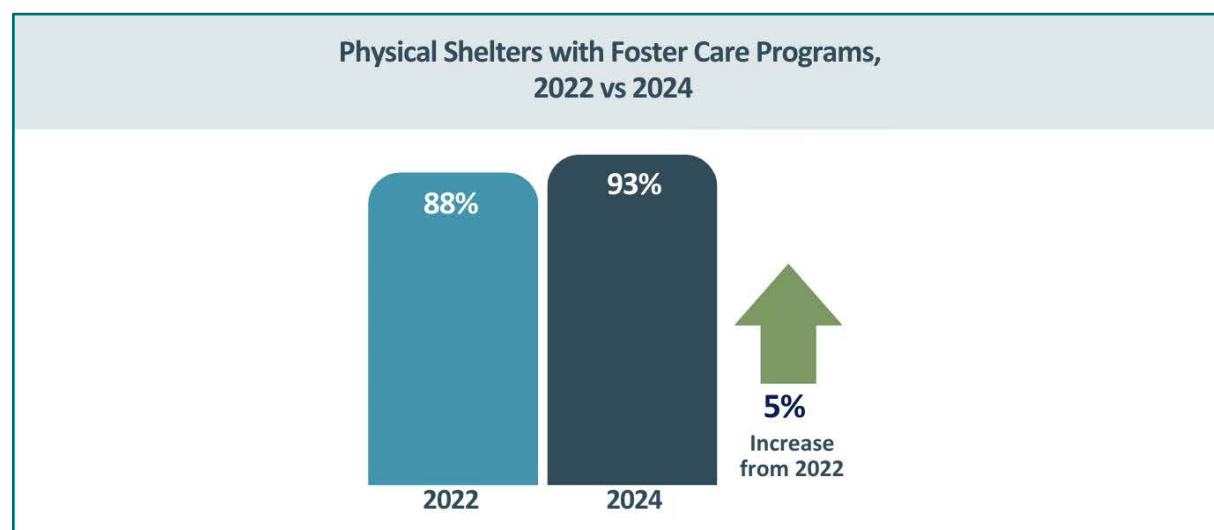
Pet Intake in Physical Shelters

In 2024, physical shelters varied in the number of dogs they accepted, reflecting diversity amongst organizations across the sector. Among those taking in dogs, one-third (33%) reported taking in between 100 and 499 dogs, making this the most common intake category. About a quarter (26%) took in between 1,000 and 4,999 dogs. Fewer shelters managed 1–99 dogs or 500–999 dogs, representing 18% each, and only 5% of shelters reported handling 5,000 or more.

Physical shelters also demonstrated a diverse range of intake volumes for cats, with one-third (33%) handling between 100 and 499 cats, the most common category. Nearly as many shelters (30%) reported intakes between 1,000 and 4,999 cats. Fewer handled 500–999 cats (19%) and 1–99 cats (14%), and only 4% managed 5,000 or more. This distribution highlights a mix of shelter capacities.

Foster Care Programs in Physical Shelters

In physical shelters, foster care programs are crucial in providing temporary homes and care for cats and dogs. In 2024, 93% of physical shelters reported having a foster care program, up from 88% in 2022. This 5-point increase is statistically significant, indicating continued momentum in expanding foster care capacity. The data suggest that more shelters are investing in foster programs as a standard part of their operations, reinforcing the growing role of temporary home placements in the sheltering system. While the increase suggests growth in foster program adoption, it is worth noting that the 2024 survey title and introduction emphasized foster care more explicitly than in 2022, which may have influenced which organizations chose to participate.

Physical Shelters with Foster Care Programs, 2022 vs 2024

88% 2022
93% 2024
5% Increase from 2022

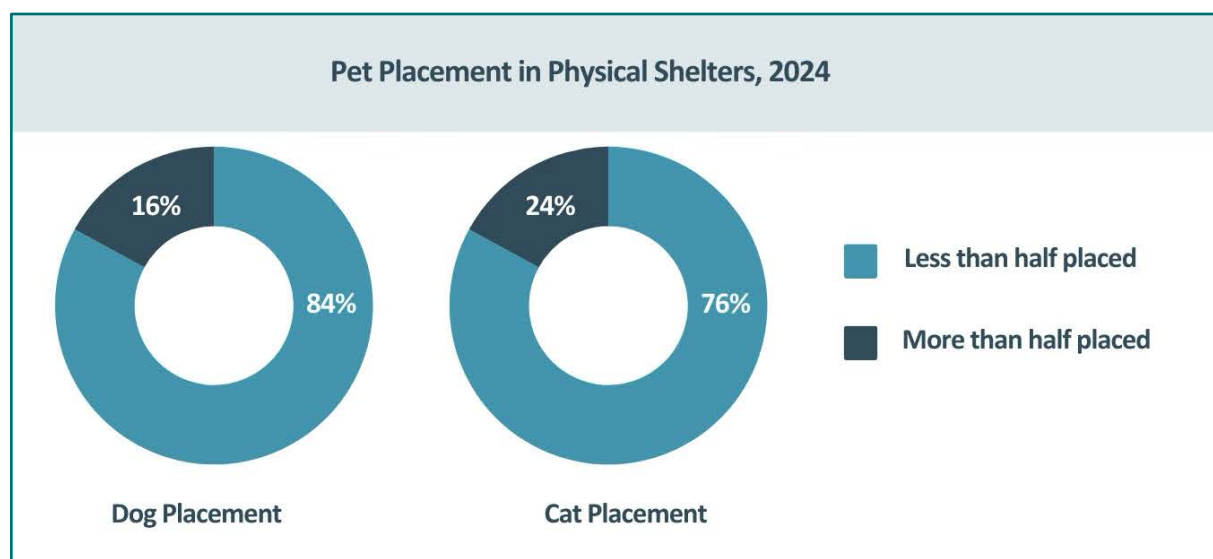## Reasons for Not Having a Foster Care Program in Physical Shelters

While foster care programs benefit animals in physical shelters, not all shelters have implemented such programs. Understanding the reasons behind the absence of foster care programs can provide insights into these shelters' challenges. Among shelters that gave a reason for not having a foster care program, the top four reasons reported for not having a foster care program in physical shelters in 2024 are as follows:

1. **Difficulty in finding foster homes (50%):** Many shelters struggle to find suitable homes and caregivers to provide temporary care for the animals. This challenge is a leading barrier, as shelters may face limited interest from the public or encounter other logistical hurdles in recruiting foster caregivers.
2. **Not enough staff (50%):** Staffing shortages have become a significant barrier, a notable increase from 2022, highlighting a growing workforce crisis. Limited staff may make it more difficult for shelters to coordinate foster placements, support caregivers, or manage the program effectively.
3. **Not enough funding (43%):** Financial constraints reflect ongoing budgetary challenges that can limit program development. Without adequate funding, shelters may struggle to cover essential costs, such as veterinary care, supplies, caregiver support, or program management.
4. **Liability concerns (39%):** Shelters express concerns about potential liabilities associated with foster care programs. Liability issues may include concerns about animal behavior, property damage, or caregiver injuries, which can deter shelters from offering foster care options.

The survey results highlight the primary challenges preventing shelters from establishing foster care programs. Addressing these issues through targeted recruitment efforts, improved utilization of volunteers to support operations, enhanced funding, and liability mitigation measures may help expand foster care opportunities, ultimately benefiting the well-being and successful placement of animals in need.

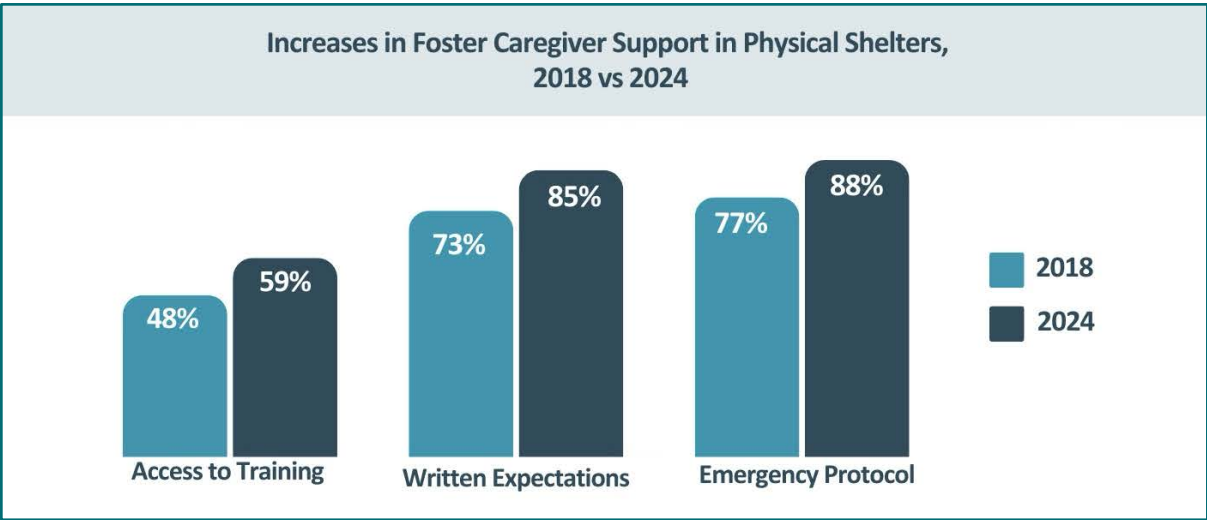## Foster Care Placement in Physical Shelters

In 2024, 84% of shelters placed less than half of their dogs in foster care, and 16% placed more than half. For cats, 76% of shelters placed less than half in foster care, while 24% placed more than half. The key finding from these data is that most shelters are only able to place a small proportion of their animals in foster homes, emphasizing the need for strategies to increase foster care capacity. Increasing the number of animals placed in foster care could help alleviate shelter overcrowding and improve animal welfare.

Pet Placement in Physical Shelters, 2024

Dog Placement: 16%, 84%
Cat Placement: 24%, 76%

- Less than half placed
- More than half placed

Foster Caregiver Support in Physical Shelters

Supporting foster caregivers is essential for successful foster care programs, ensuring they are well-prepared, confident, and able to provide quality animal care. The survey assessed several aspects of support for foster caregivers, revealing clear trends. From 2018 to 2024, several areas of support have shown significant improvements.

Access to caregiver training has increased significantly, from 48% in 2018 to 59% in 2024. This improvement suggests that more shelters recognize the importance of equipping caregivers with the knowledge and skills they need to care for animals effectively. Similarly, the percentage of shelters providing clear written expectations for foster caregivers increased from 73% in 2018 to 85% in 2024, a gain of 12 percentage points. This is an important improvement, as research has shown that providing training is a significant factor in fostering retention (see, for example, *Dog Foster Volunteer Retention* by Reese et al). This growth reflects a stronger emphasis on communication and clarity, ensuring caregivers understand their roles and responsibilities. Emergency protocols for foster caregivers have also improved significantly, from 77% in 2018 to 88% in 2024. This change demonstrates that more shelters prioritize clear guidance for caregivers in emergencies, providing them with the confidence to respond appropriately during crises.

Increases in Foster Caregiver Support in Physical Shelters, 2018 vs 2024

Foster Caregiver Roster Audits in Physical Shelters

Among physical shelters aware of their organization's auditing practices, 76% reported auditing their foster caregiver rosters at least annually in 2024. This process helps maintain an up-to-date list of active volunteers who have fostered at least one pet in the past year. In contrast, 24% of shelters did not conduct such audits. These findings reflect a strong commitment among most shelters to maintaining an active and engaged pool of foster caregivers.

Looking at trends, the percentage of shelters conducting these audits has increased slightly since 2020. 70% of shelters reported auditing their rosters in 2020, compared to 76% in 2024—a six percentage point increase. This upward trend suggests that more shelters recognize the importance of regularly reviewing and updating their foster caregiver lists to maintain volunteer engagement and support effective foster care programs.

Foster Care Programs: Pets Sent to Foster Care, Caregivers, and Process in Physical Shelters and Foster-Based Organizations

This section explores the dynamics of foster care programs within both physical shelters and foster-based organizations. Our analysis examines five key areas: the number of pets sent to foster care, the role and growth of active foster caregivers, the efficiency of foster onboarding processes, the impact of foster application requirements, and the influence of social media posting on foster care success.
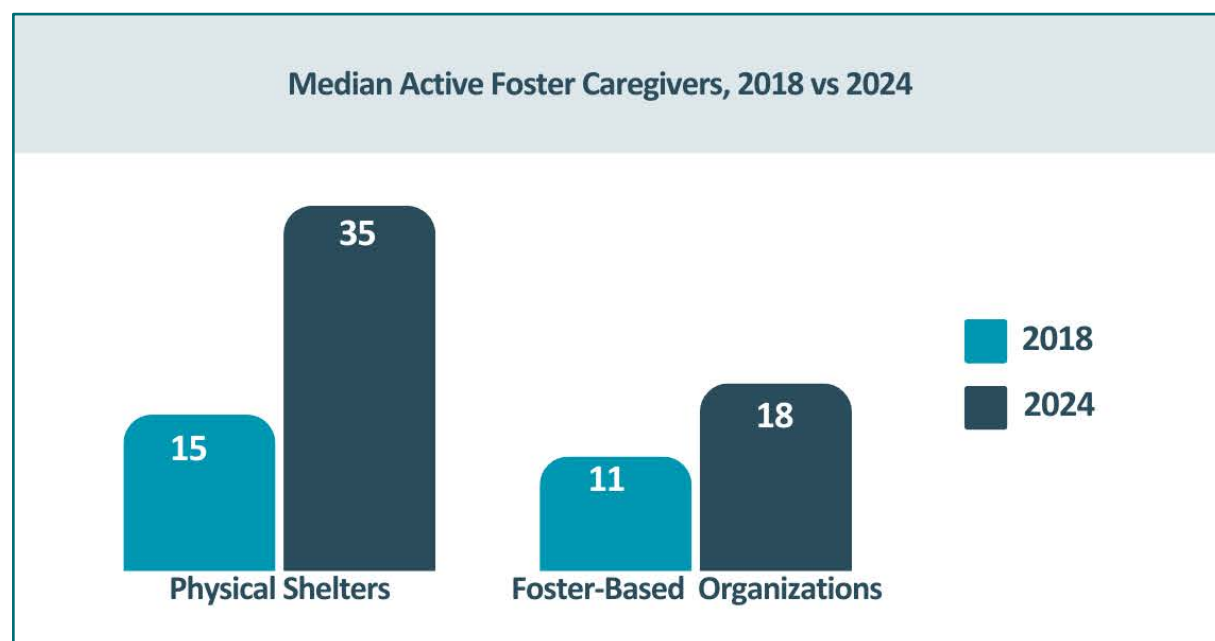
Pets Sent to Foster Care in Physical Shelters and Foster-Based Organizations

In 2024, the median number of pets sent to foster care by physical shelters was 212. This includes a mix of adult dogs, puppies, adult cats, and kittens. Over time, the median number of pets sent to foster care by physical shelters has increased significantly, from 137 in 2018 to 212 in 2024—a growth of 75 pets or 55%. This upward trend underscores a clear shift toward greater use of foster care in physical shelters, highlighting its growing importance in providing temporary homes and supporting animal welfare.

By contrast, foster-based organizations maintained relatively stable foster care numbers. In 2024, foster-based organizations' median number of pets sent to foster care was 135, showing only a modest increase from 105 in 2018. This steady pattern suggests that while foster-based organizations rely on foster care, their overall capacity has remained consistent rather than expanding significantly.

Active Foster Caregivers in Physical Shelters and Foster-Based Organizations

In 2024, the median number of active foster caregivers in physical shelters was 35, a significant growth of 20 caregivers, or 133%, from 15 in 2018. This total includes caregivers for both dogs/puppies and cats/kittens. The increase highlights a more substantial commitment to maintaining a network of volunteers who can provide temporary homes for animals. Foster-based organizations also experienced significant growth in the number of active foster caregivers. In 2024, the median number of active fosters in foster-based organizations was 18, a significant increase of 7 caregivers or 64% from 11 in 2018. This growth demonstrates that, like physical shelters, foster-based organizations have strengthened their reliance on active foster caregivers, though the overall increase was more modest compared to shelters.

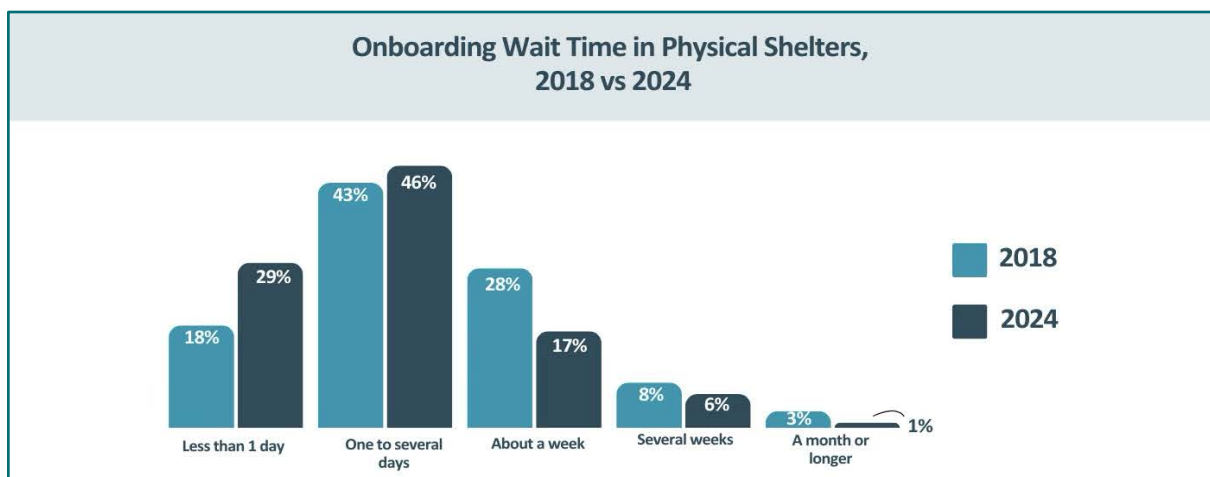Median Active Foster Caregivers, 2018 vs 2024

Foster Onboarding Wait Time in Physical Shelters and Foster-Based Organizations

In this section, we will focus on the foster onboarding wait times. When we mention "foster onboarding wait time," we refer to the time it takes for a new foster caregiver to complete the process of becoming approved and ready to bring a pet home, which includes the period from their initial request to become a foster caregiver to the point at which they can officially take a pet into their care.

In 2024, foster onboarding wait times in physical shelters showed a clear preference for quick processing, with nearly half (46%) of caregivers completing the process in one to several days. An additional 29% of caregivers were onboarded in less than one day, reflecting a strong emphasis on speed. However, some caregivers still experienced longer waits, with 17% reporting that it took about a week, 6% waiting several weeks, and just 1% facing waits of a month or longer. Compared to 2018, these figures show a clear shift toward faster onboarding. The percentage of caregivers onboarded in less than one day rose from 18% in 2018 to 29% in 2024, while those waiting about a week dropped from 28% to 17%. These trends indicate that physical shelters have become more efficient in preparing new caregivers, minimizing delays, and ensuring faster placements.

Onboarding Wait Time in Physical Shelters, 2018 vs 2024

Foster-based organizations in 2024 also focused on streamlining the onboarding process, with 44% of caregivers completing onboarding in one to several days, making this the most common timeframe. Fourteen percent of organizations completed onboarding in less than one day, a significant increase from 5% in 2018. Meanwhile, 29% of caregivers reported waiting about a week, down from 44% in 2018, 11% experienced several weeks, and 2% waited a month or longer. These figures reveal a similar trend toward faster onboarding, though the changes were less pronounced than in physical shelters. Foster-based organizations have made progress in reducing wait times, but their improvements have been more gradual, suggesting opportunities for further streamlining.

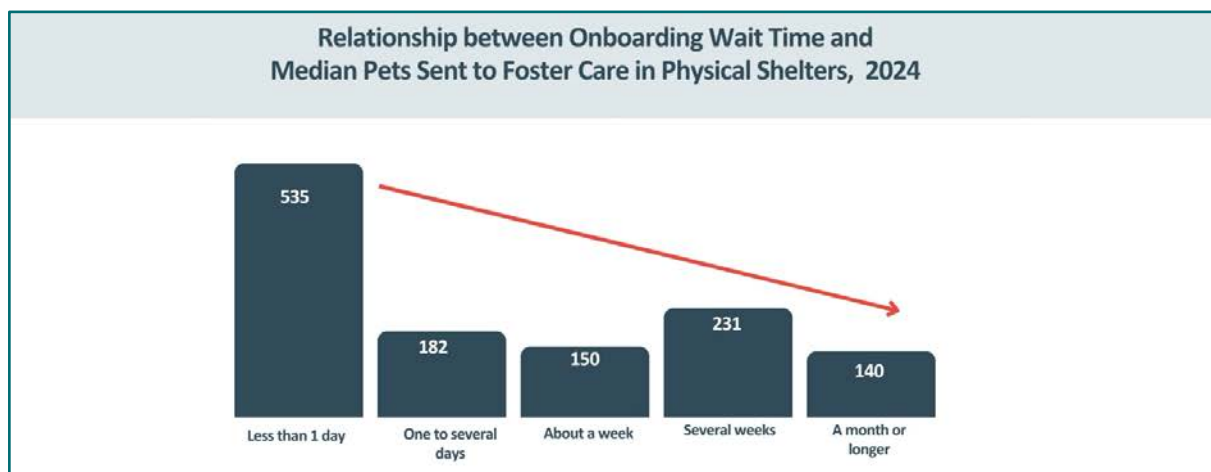Onboarding Wait Time in Foster-Based Organizations, 2018 vs 2024

The Relationship between Foster Onboarding Wait Time and Number of Pets Sent to Foster Care in Physical Shelters and Foster-Based Organizations

In 2024, there was a clear relationship between foster onboarding wait time and the number of pets sent to foster care in both physical shelters and foster-based organizations. The data show that shorter onboarding times were generally associated with more pets placed in foster care. This relationship emphasizes the importance of efficient onboarding processes, which may impact the capacity to place pets in temporary homes.

Physical shelters that completed onboarding in less than one day reported the highest median number of pets sent to foster care, with a median of 535. The median number of pets fostered generally decreased as the onboarding wait time increased. For caregivers onboarded in one to several days, the median was 182 pets. Those who completed onboarding in about a week fostered a median of 150 pets, while those waiting several weeks had a median of 231. The lowest median, 140 pets, was observed for those with an onboarding time of a month or longer. These results indicate that longer wait times are associated with fewer pets placed in foster care.

A similar trend was observed in foster-based organizations, though the relationship was less pronounced. For caregivers who completed onboarding in less than one day, the median number of pets sent to foster care was 177. This number decreased to 171 for onboarded in one to several days, 132 for waiting about a week, and 84 for waiting several weeks. Caregivers who waited a month or longer had the lowest median, with 34 pets fostered. Similarly, this suggests that faster onboarding is associated with higher foster placements.

The Impact of Requirements Before Fostering on Active Foster Caregivers and Pet Placement in Physical Shelters and Foster-Based Organizations

In 2024, our analysis of foster care processes in physical shelters and foster-based organizations revealed a clear pattern: specific requirements—especially those involving direct screening and evaluation—were consistently associated with significant reductions in the number of active foster caregivers and the number of pets sent to foster care. While these requirements may help ensure the quality and safety of foster placements, they also appear to create barriers, limiting the number of caregivers and pets fostered.

Screening and Evaluation Processes in Physical Shelters

Screening and evaluation steps in physical shelters, such as interviews, home visits, and meetings with household members, were consistently associated with significant reductions in foster care placement. Interviews led to a 67% reduction in active foster caregivers and a 75% reduction in pets sent to foster care. While one-on-one conversations can help answer questions and build trust with potential caregivers, structured interviews may unintentionally introduce barriers or biases that limit how many individuals are approved to foster.

Home visits showed a similar effect, reducing the number of active foster caregivers by 63% and the number of pets placed in foster care by 75%. While some organizations continue to conduct home visits, these checks are time-consuming for staff and may unintentionally exclude potential foster caregivers due to economic, cultural, or other factors influenced by unconscious bias. Requiring caregivers to introduce shelter staff to existing pets or household members also reduced placement. Shelters that required staff to meet existing pets saw a 54% decrease in active caregivers and a 70% drop in pets fostered. Similarly, shelters required to meet other household members led to a 50% reduction in active caregivers and a 70% decrease in pets placed. While these steps may help ensure compatibility, they discourage participation, limiting the overall success of foster programs.

Screening & Evaluation Requirements with Negative Impact in Physical Shelters, 2024

Foster Application Requirement Used	Percentage Change in Median Active Foster Caregivers	Percentage Change in Median Pets Sent to Foster Care
Interview	-67%	-75%
Home Visit	-63%	-75%
Meet Other Pets	-54%	-70%
Meet Household Members	-50%	-70%

Screening and Evaluation Processes in Foster-Based Organizations

Foster-based organizations also experienced similar patterns, with screening and evaluation steps linked to reduced foster placement. Home visits were associated with a 40% reduction in active foster caregivers and a 47% decrease in pets placed. Meeting other pets had a similar effect, resulting in a 35% decrease in active caregivers and a 46% drop in pets placed. Additionally, requiring caregivers to meet household members led to a 25% decline in active caregivers and a 50% reduction in pets fostered.

Screening & Evaluation Requirements with Negative Impact in Foster-Based Organizations, 2024

Foster Application Requirement Used	Percentage Change in Median Active Foster Caregivers	Percentage Change in Median Pets Sent to Foster Care
Home Visit	-40%	-47%
Meet Other Pets	-35%	-46%
Meet Household Members	-25%	-50%

Administrative Checks in Physical Shelters

Administrative requirements, including reference checks, landlord verification, and veterinary record reviews, also significantly impacted foster placement. Reference checks were associated with a 55% reduction in active caregivers and a 78% reduction in pets placed. While part of many foster programs, these checks may discourage potential fosters and reduce the number of pets that find temporary homes.

Shelters that required landlord checks experienced a 46% reduction in active caregivers and a 75% decrease in pets placed. These checks ensure that foster caregivers have appropriate pet housing, but they can create an additional hurdle for potential fosters. Verifying veterinary records for existing pets was associated with a 42% decrease in active foster caregivers and a 75% reduction in pets placed. While this requirement is intended to support animal health and safety, it can be misleading—caregivers who use multiple vets or obtain medications outside traditional channels may appear noncompliant despite being responsible pet owners.

Administrative Checks with Negative Impact in Physical Shelters, 2024

Foster Application Requirement Used	Percentage Change in Median Active Foster Caregivers	Percentage Change in Median Pets Sent to Foster Care
Reference Check	-55%	-78%
Landlord Check	-46%	-75%
Vet Records	-42%	-75%

The Impact of Social Media Posting on Pet Placement in Physical Shelters and Foster-Based Organizations

In 2024, our analysis revealed a clear relationship between social media posting frequency and the success of foster programs in both physical shelters and foster-based organizations. Using the Social Media Posting Index (SMPI)—an average measure of posting frequency across Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok—we found that organizations that posted more frequently achieved significantly higher foster placements. This relationship was particularly evident in physical shelters, where those with a low SMPI (0–4 posts per week) had a median of 151 pets placed in foster care. In contrast, shelters with moderate SMPI (5–9 posts per week) placed a median of 210 pets, while those with high SMPI (10+ posts per week)

placed 350 pets. The positive impact of social media posting indicates that as social media activity increases, so does the number of pets placed in foster care.

A similar pattern emerged among foster-based organizations. Those with low SMPI placed a median of 103 pets in foster care, while organizations with moderate SMPI placed 111 pets, and those with high SMPI placed 240 pets. These results highlight the critical role of social media as a tool for promoting foster programs and connecting with potential caregivers. Ultimately, our analysis suggests that organizations should prioritize a strong, consistent social media presence—especially on Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok—to maximize their foster success. Frequent posting enhances connecting with communities, promotes foster programs, and places more pets in temporary homes.

However, it's not just how often organizations post—it's also what they post. To measure this, we developed the Foster Mention Index (FMI)—an average of how many times per week an organization mentioned a fostered pet or foster care across Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. Organizations with higher FMI scores placed significantly more pets in foster care. In physical shelters, those with no mentions had a median of 130 pets placed, compared to 266 for those with some mentions (1–2 times per week) and 326 for those with frequent mentions (3 or more times per week). Rescue organizations showed a similar trend, with the highest placement numbers among those that frequently mentioned foster care. These findings suggest that highlighting foster care in social media posts, not just posting often, can meaningfully boost program success.

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