

# Foster Caregiver Research Report

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by Edge Research



Maddie's  
Fund

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Photo by Daria Shevtsova on Pexels

## Overview

We believe that foster care is the gold standard of lifesaving and that foster caregivers are the VIPS (Very Important People). We know that animal shelters can be stressful places for dogs and cats, especially for those with long-term stays. Foster care provides dogs and cats with a respite from the shelter environment and improves welfare. It allows the shelter to learn more about a pet's personality in a more natural environment, and enables foster caregivers to take pictures and video, which can help prospective adopters envision the pet in their own home. Foster care also frees up space, allowing shelter staff to spend more time with the pets who remain in shelter care.

Fostering is an important step on a pet's journey to their forever home. A home environment is best for their health and well-being. Fostering cats and dogs allows them to thrive in a home environment and practice forming bonds with their caregivers. For pets who have been waiting longer for adoption, foster caregivers can help reassure adopters that these pets are a good fit for a home and speak to the type of home or family that would be the best match for the pet.

While there are many potential benefits of foster care, animal shelters and rescue organizations often state that difficulty recruiting new foster caregivers is the biggest barrier to creating and sustaining a foster program.

Sponsored by Maddie's Fund® and conducted by Edge Research, this Foster Caregiver Market Research was initiated to help identify a target audience for foster caregivers, as well as the best messages and communication methods to engage them. The project included quantitative and qualitative research. The qualitative portion consisted of three focus groups with people who may potentially become foster caregivers, 15 interviews with people who have some foster experience and 10 interviews with pet care professionals. The quantitative part of the study included an online survey with 1,079 prospective foster caregivers and 823 experienced foster caregivers. The prospective caregivers (prospects) were selected from an online survey panel, Research Now, which is an opt-in panel where people sign up to periodically take surveys. From there, prospects were screened to find people who met the following criteria: never fostered before; have had a dog or cat in the past or are open to it in the future; not allergic to cats and/or dogs (including members of their household). The project included some people (113) who currently live in situations where a/another pet is not a possibility.

### The project's focus was:

- What the general public currently knew about foster care;
- What motivated foster caregivers to foster a pet;
- Identify new audiences for foster caregivers;
  - » Type of foster care programs that would appeal to them, and;
  - » Determine inspiring messaging and communication methods to engage them.



## Research Summary

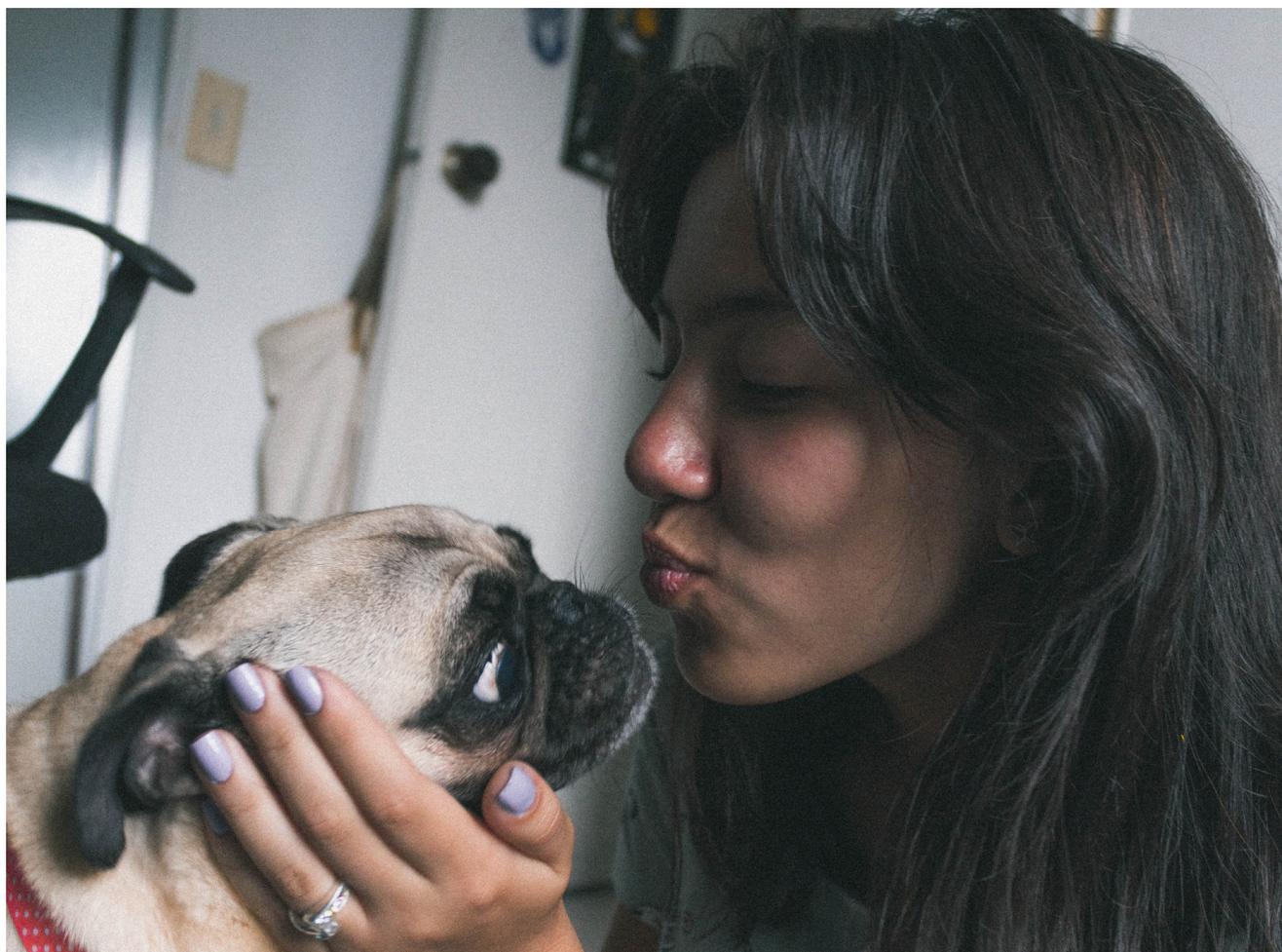
Prospective foster caregivers, experienced foster caregivers and pet care professionals participated in this research study in 2017. The goal of the study was to determine prospective foster caregiver target markets and methods to engage them. **Primary takeaways from the study are two-fold; that there is an opportunity for shelters to develop programs to attract, recruit and sustain pet foster caregivers, and that the public is not yet aware of pet foster care and the role it plays in adoption.** The study found that empowering foster caregivers to share their experiences with family, friends, neighbors and colleagues is likely the best way to gain new foster caregivers.

The survey, which included 1,079 prospective foster caregivers and 823 experienced foster caregivers, found that half of prospects were open to the idea of taking in a pet from a shelter or rescue organization, but 84% of them lacked awareness of the homeless pet population and are unsure how fostering fits into lifesaving.

Over a third (35%) of prospects heard about fostering through someone they knew who had fostered, while almost half (46%) of active foster caregivers heard of fostering through a shelter or rescue organization. Foster caregivers had positive feelings about fostering, with 64% feeling happy about it, while 23% of prospects felt stressed.

Prospects who were younger, lived alone and were aware of the homeless pet problem stood out as being interested in fostering. They showed the most interest in fostering adult dogs and senior pets. Both prospects and caregivers cited social media as being the best way to get their attention, followed by news stories about fostering.

Researchers concluded that shelters and rescue organizations need to encourage current fosters to talk about fostering and share their success stories since 73% of prospects would trust information on fostering from them. When recruiting new foster caregivers, organizations need to communicate key messages, such as explaining the role and function of fostering as well as support that is available to foster caregivers.



# Results

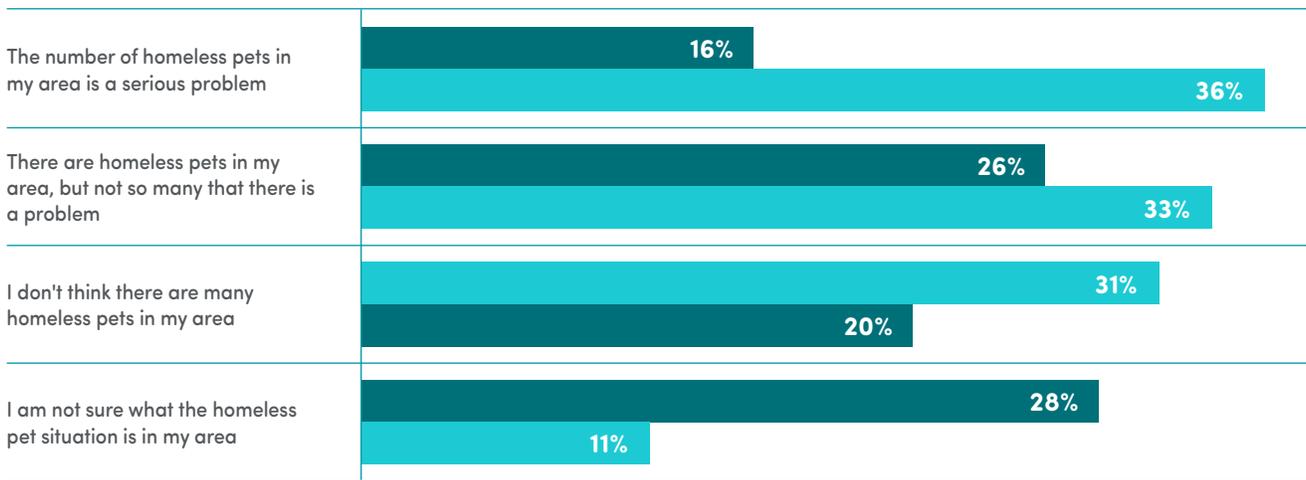
## Impressions of Fostering

The study identified that 61% of prospects already own a cat or a dog and 66% consider themselves an animal lover. Fifty percent of prospects were open to the possibility of taking in a pet from a shelter or rescue organization. However, contrary to actual foster caregivers, prospects lacked awareness of the homeless pet problem (84%) as well as understanding of the importance of fostering (figure 1). It is unclear to them how fostering fits into support for homeless pets and their transition to adoption. When prospects were asked to rank how best to help shelters and rescue organizations, fostering ranked third among prospects and comes after adopting a pet(s) and donating money to an organization. Donating supplies and volunteering were ranked fourth and fifth.

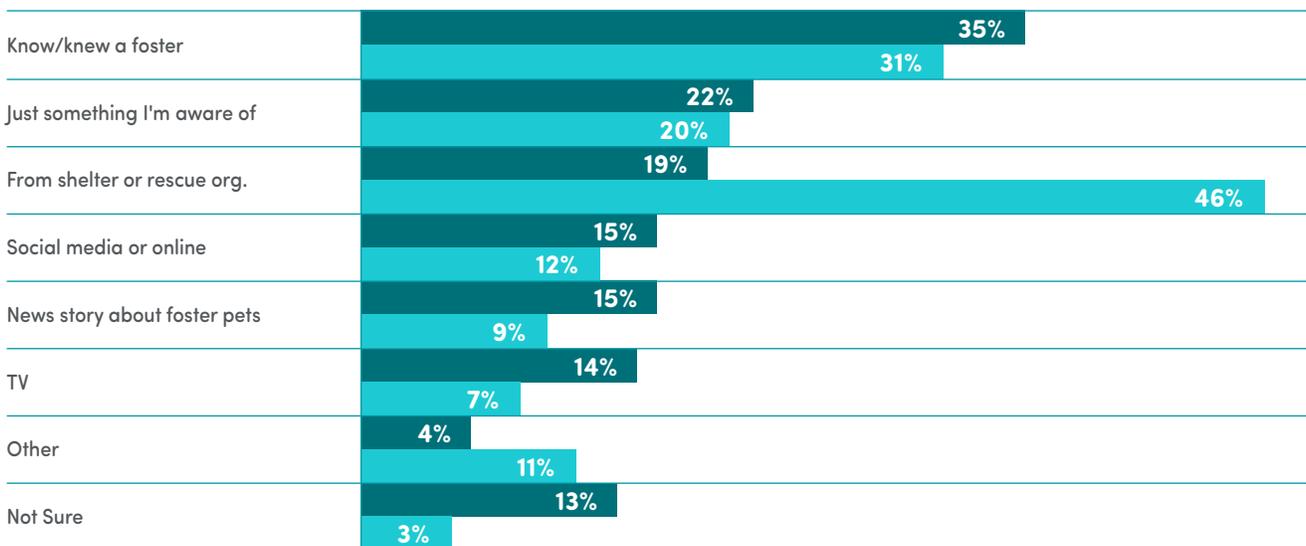
Half of prospects were familiar with fostering (52%), and most often heard about by word of mouth. Current foster caregivers most often became familiar with fostering directly through local animal shelters or rescue organizations (46%) (figure 2).

Homeless Pet Problem in Your Area? (Figure 1)

Prospects Fosters

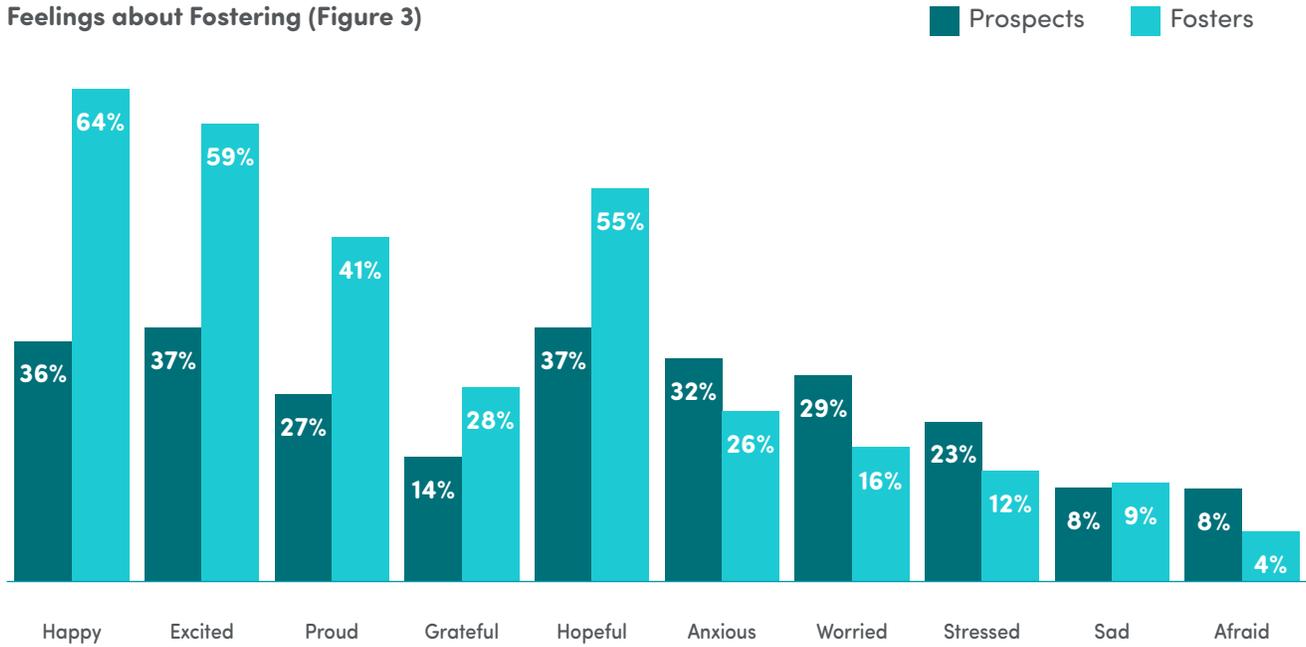


How People Heard about Fostering (Figure 2)



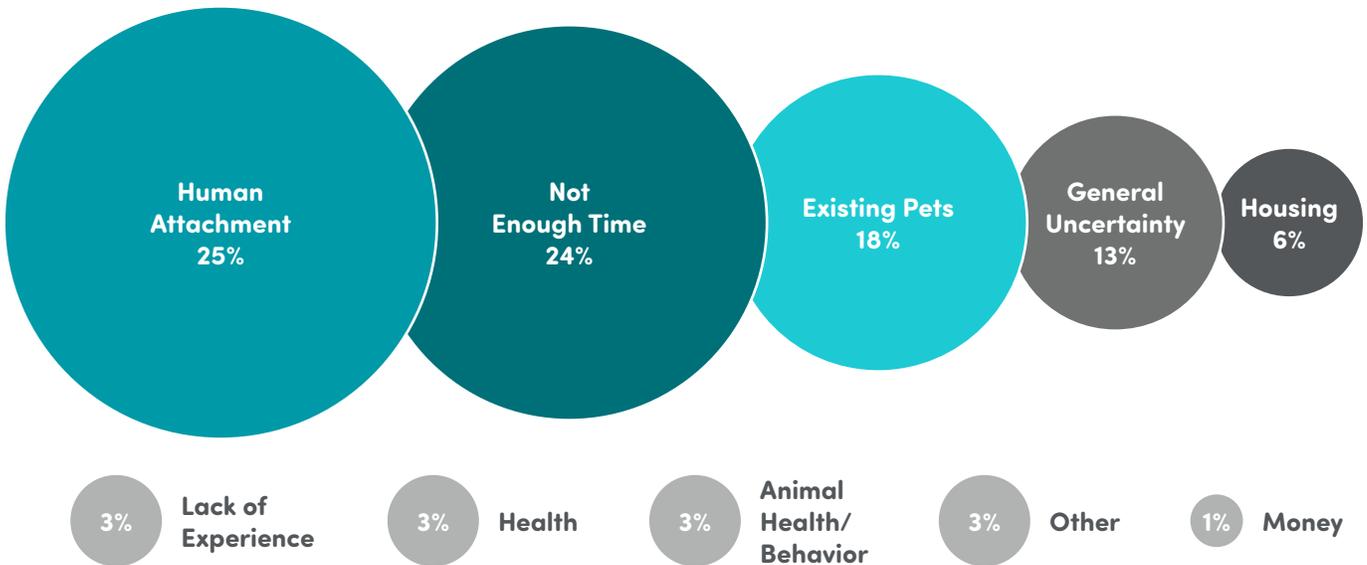
Prospects' feelings about fostering were mixed (figure 3), divided between their aspirations for the animal and their concern about being able to do it. Prospects were most likely to feel excited (37%), hopeful (37%) and happy (36%) about fostering, followed closely by feelings of anxiety (32%) and worry (29%). Twenty-three percent of prospects felt stressed about the idea of fostering compared to only 12% of active foster caregivers.

Feelings about Fostering (Figure 3)



### Hesitance about Fostering

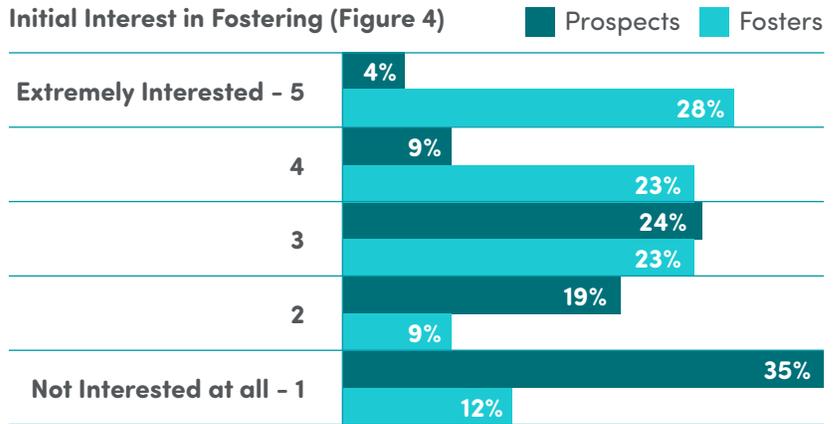
Not having enough time (24%), worries about getting too attached (25%) and other pets in the household (18%) were the most common reasons that prospective foster caregivers weren't interested in fostering. Seventy-two percent of prospects and 62% of foster caregivers felt that fostering requires special training. Sixty-four percent of prospects and 61% of foster caregivers felt that foster pets require more work, time and effort than typical pets.



## Interest in Fostering

When the interest in fostering was explored (figure 4), researchers found that initial interest in fostering amongst the prospects group was relatively low (13%) compared to the foster caregiver group (51%). However, subgroups that stand out, include younger prospects, those who live alone, and those who have some sense of the problem of homeless pets.

Initial Interest in Fostering (Figure 4)



As for foster pet preferences, prospects were most interested in fostering adult dogs and senior pets (figure 5). The same trend was observed in the focus groups:

***“Babies are less appealing. They run around, ruin furniture, need a lot of patience. Adult pets are set in their ways, more relaxed.”***  
 – Oakland, CA.

Prospects and foster caregivers were least interested in fostering pets with destructive behavior, chronic health problems and aggressive behavior. However, experienced fosters were more open to fostering pets with health issues.

Interest in Fostering (Figure 5)

Type of Pet	Prospects	Fosters
Adult dog	36%	57%
Senior pet (age 7+)	35%	57%
Anxious/shy behavior	24%	43%
Pupp(y/ies)	23%	33%
Adult cat	22%	38%
Recovering from illness, injury, or surgery	18%	37%
Kitten(s)	16%	30%
End of life care	13%	32%
Aggressive behavior	8%	19%
Chronic health problems	7%	22%
Destructive behavior	2%	9%

Prospects were most/initially interested in short term or urgent models of foster caregiving. Foster caregivers had a similar prioritization but 23% chose the model they are likely used to – fostering until adoption (figure 6). Forty-five percent of prospects and 65% of foster caregivers expressed interest in a team approach to foster care (figure 7). The team approach involves a group of people (2 – 7) who work together to find homes for foster pets. Teams are comprised of people who fulfill different roles, such as social media, photographer, pet transport, caregivers, etc.

## Interest in Fostering Models (Figure 6)

1st/2nd Choice	Prospects	Fosters
Weekend/Respite	20%	21%
Last Chance	17%	21%
Emergency	14%	19%
Seasonal	13%	14%
Until Adoption	12%	23%
Team	9%	8%

**41%** of Prospects are not interested in any of these

**26%** of Fosters are equally interested in all of them

I would do it. I feel that animals are like humans and they have feelings and they get tired of being in a cage. If there is a program doing that, get the word out there. **Things would be easier for them if they could get out sometimes. At least get people to learn about having an animal.** Get a little experience. – Foster

## Team Fostering Roles (Figure 7)

**45%** of Prospects and

**69%** of Fosters are interested in a team approach.

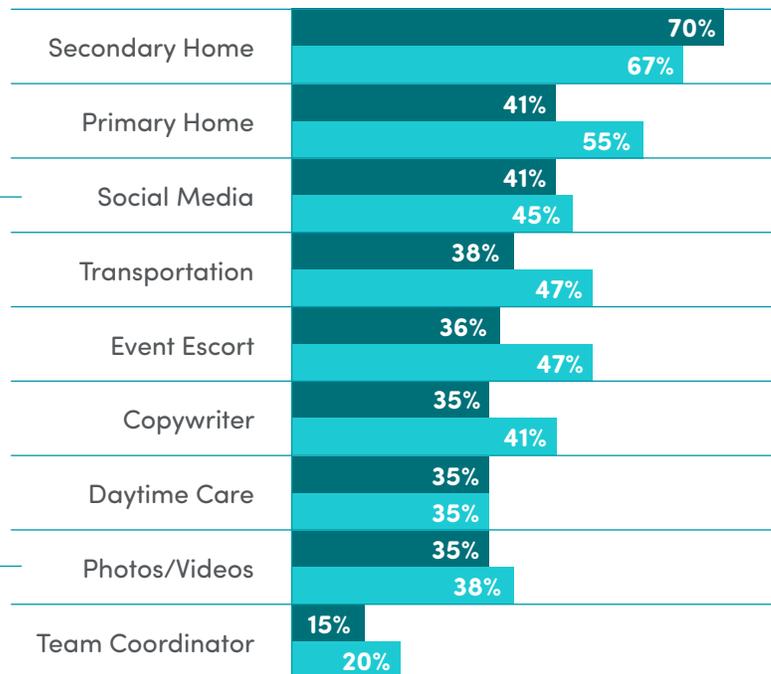
**Higher than overall interest in fostering for both.**

Young Prospects and unmarried Prospects are significantly more interested in "promotional" roles than their older or married counterparts.

Rural Prospects most interested in providing secondary home (83%)

What are the chances that people on the team can keep their schedule consistent. Or consistent walking – Kansas City

### Among Those Interested in Team Approach



■ Prospects ■ Fosters

## Messaging and Communications

Both focus groups and the survey respondents were exposed to different messages that explained the role and function of fostering as well as messages which push back on shelter pet stereotypes. The most preferred messages are included in figure 8. Note that the titles in bold were not included in the message. Interest in fostering doubled after prospects were shown the messages, suggesting that **the right promotion of fostering may have a crucial impact when looking for new foster caregivers** (figure 9).

(Figure 8)

**BREAK STEREOTYPE OF SHELTER PET** - I used to think shelters were places for pets who had been abused or hurt in some way, but when my neighbor passed away, her cat had to go to a shelter just because there was no one to care for him. I started fostering shelter pets because I thought it must be very hard for a pet to go from a life in a loving home to a shelter where they might have to wait a while to be adopted. Please consider fostering – yours may not be the forever home, but you can help these pets remember what home feels like.

**BONDING AS BRIDGE TO ADOPTION/COUNTER EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT BARRIER** - My last foster dog was rescued from a puppy mill. She was a sweet, loving dog but she was shy and anxious around people after all she had been through. A family with two small children really liked her, but she needed a chance to live in a calm, quiet setting and learn to trust again before she was ready to be around kids. After living with me for a little while, she got so much better! Now she's happy to be around people, and her new family, the one with the little kids, knows that she's ready to come home.

**TRIAL RUN/CAN ADOPT IF YOU WANT** - We always had pets growing up as a kid but I wasn't sure I was ready to have a pet on my own or how a dog would fit into my lifestyle. I heard about fostering and talked to my local shelter. It turned out to be a great way to try out having a dog without worrying about what happens if it didn't work out. I picked out a great little guy. There were plenty of families interested but I fell in love and got to adopt him. It turns out we were meant to be!

**DIDN'T THINK I COULD DO IT, BUT I DID** - I love animals and have two dogs. I heard about fostering and I know that a lot of shelters are crowded and wanted to help out. But I was nervous – I love animals but that doesn't make me an animal expert! Fortunately, the shelter gave me guidance every step of the way, from choosing a dog I felt comfortable with, to advising on how to bring her into the house and how to transition her to her new family. And they paid for her medical care and shots. They made it easy for me to help!

(Figure 9)

**33%** of Prospects become more interested (to some degree) after reading the messages.

After messaging, \_\_\_\_\_

**26%** of Prospects are interested in fostering (up from 13% initially).

### Most Likely to Shift More Interested

- Households with kids (40%)
- People under 40 (39%)
- Current pet owners (37%)
- Those who see a homeless pet problem (38%) or any homeless pets in their area (37%)
- People familiar with fostering (36%)
- People who live in urban areas (35%)

In terms of best ways to reach them, prospects and foster caregivers alike cite social media as the best way to get their attention, followed by news stories about fostering. When they need to find information on their own, prospects would use an online search or go directly to local shelters or rescue organizations (figure 10). For prospects, the most trusted sources of information about fostering would come from veterinarians/pet health professionals, friends/family and local shelters or rescues (figure 11). Local organizations were more trusted for foster information than were national organizations. Although 73% of prospects would trust information on fostering from friends and family who have done it, the majority of foster caregivers (60%) seldom share their experiences with others. Sharing foster stories was the top selection by foster caregivers who were asked about how would they prefer to potentially expand their support for foster care programs and efforts (figure 12).

**(Figure 10)**  
**Best Ways for Organizations to Share Info on Fostering**

	Prospect	Foster	
Social Media	26%	35%	Higher for Prospects familiar with fostering and current fosters.
News Stories	17%	16%	
TV Ads	14%	10%	
Email	12%	13%	Higher for Prospects unfamiliar with fostering
Mail	10%	7%	Higher for retired Prospects

## How Prospects and Fosters Would Seek Information on Fostering

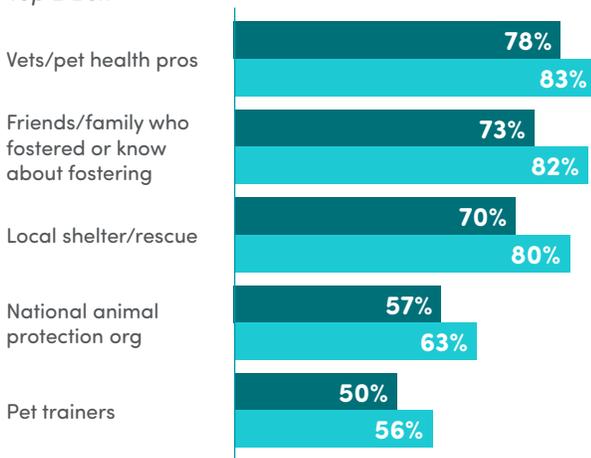
	Visit a shelter /rescue	Shelter/rescue website	Search engine	Talk to a vet	Talk to friends/family	Social Media to connect with shelter	Visit a pet store	Social Media to ask friends
Prospect	55%	55%	34%	25%	23%	19%	10%	9%
Foster	59%	57%	33%	28%	22%	<b>27%</b>	11%	<b>13%</b>

Higher for current pet owner Prospects

**(Figure 11)**      ■ Prospects      ■ Fosters

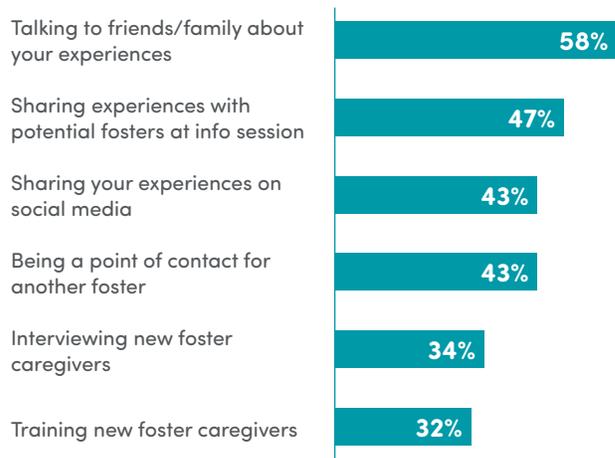
## Most Trusted Sources about Fostering

Top 2 Box



**(Figure 12)**

## Interest in Additional Support for Fostering





## In Conclusion

Many animal welfare organizations state that the biggest barrier to creating a bigger foster program is difficulty recruiting new foster caregivers. This research identified areas that shelters and rescue organizations can focus on in order to recruit new foster caregivers. Increasing interest from prospects can be as simple as encouraging current foster caregivers to share their stories or as in-depth as creating a detailed campaign to raise awareness of the need for foster caregivers.

Organizations have the opportunity to create new points of entry for foster caregivers, such as foster teams and short-term fostering opportunities to build the pool of new fosters. Since the study shows messaging and reassurance are important when recruiting new fosters, shelters and rescue organizations have the opportunity to work on communicating key messages, including that support is available to fosters to ensure a positive experience.

