

The ASV Guidelines in Real Life

PART FOUR:

# The Foster On-Deck System at the ARL of Boston

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A ginger cat is sitting in a white chalk circle on a dirt field. A baseball is visible in the bottom left corner of the circle. The background is a brown dirt field with several paw print graphics scattered around.

In 2010, the Association of Shelter Veterinarians (ASV) released a document several years in the making: *Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters*. Developed by a roster of veterinary experts, the standards are designed to “balance animal welfare science with practical and realistic recommendations for shelters,” and to provide a vision based on the needs of animals, which, the authors noted, remain the same regardless of how individual organizations’ missions and resources may differ. Here, we feature the fourth in a series of stories using real-life shelter examples to demonstrate how the ASV guidelines can be applied within the sheltering and rescue field to create better and more humane outcomes for the creatures we care for.

**W**hen kittens who are too young to be adopted show up at the shelter, what if all you needed to do was call the person who signed up to take foster kittens that day to say, "They're here!"?

What if, instead of putting the kittens in a general housing area at the shelter, introducing them to whatever infectious diseases and stressors might be waiting, you could examine the kittens, screen them for potential problems, and send them right into the protective care of a trained foster parent?

What if you could schedule all the points of care the kittens will need before they even leave the building?

This kind of efficient system can be put in place, with some hard work, proactive recruitment, and excellent planning. The payoff for the kittens lasts them a lifetime. And there's a positive ripple effect for all the other animals in the shelter, which can be measured in increased capacity for care, decreased risk of infectious disease, more time for enrichment, and even opportunities for improved housing.

This kind of system is at the heart of population management. According to the Association of Shelter Veterinarians' *Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters*, "Population management describes an active process of planning, on-going daily evaluation, and response to changing conditions as an organization cares for multiple animals. Effective population management requires a plan for intentionally managing each animal's shelter stay that takes into consideration the organization's ability to provide care ... "

This example is not just a dream. In 2010, the Animal Rescue League of Boston (ARL-Boston) worked with the UC Davis Koret Shelter Medicine Program to implement the Foster On-Deck System as part of an overall feline population management strategy. Assistant manager Melissa Tanguay coordinated the program. Tanguay reports that the shelter has "seen such a positive difference from managing our foster program in a more proactive way: happier staff, happier foster parents, and healthier foster animals. It has been a win-win for everyone."

So how did they make it happen?

## **Planning Pathways**

The ARL-Boston has worked to develop pathway planning, a crucial element of making this kind of program work. Pathway planning is a method of actively tracking each animal's shelter stay from the moment they arrive (or even before) to the moment they leave.

The idea behind pathway planning is that each animal is on the road to an outcome from the very beginning, and in order to make that outcome positive, each step should be anticipated, scheduled, and completed on time. Capacity needs and limits (such as staffing, housing, and other resources) can be evaluated for each individual pathway, helping to target priorities or identify problems.

Pathway planning does not mean an animal can't change direction; it just means that each animal is understood to be going somewhere, with a plan in place for how to get there. Pathway plans for each animal should be evaluated daily. The pathways themselves should also be monitored regularly to be sure they are running smoothly. For example, is the adoption pathway backlogged with animals waiting for spay/neuter? What's causing the delay? How can it be eliminated? Would rearranging the clinic's schedule help?

Many shelters have developed innovative lifesaving systems for getting animals through the shelter quickly and efficiently. These systems use good management and proactive planning to reduce risk for the population as a whole and for the individual animals.



## **No Surprise is a Good Surprise**

Here is a hypothetical example of the kind of planning that can allow a shelter to save more lives: Say a woman calls to say she has found a healthy, friendly, 6-week-old male kitten and plans to bring him into the shelter that afternoon.

This shelter knows that, due to laws in its particular state, it will not be able to place the kitten up for adoption for another two weeks. Rather than have the kitten come in, a shelter staffer calls an "on-deck" foster parent, who has signed up and received training at the beginning of the season. Knowing that they're next in line, the foster family is already prepared to accept the kitten.

The kitten is evaluated at entry by intake staff and found to be in good condition. He is checked for a microchip, vaccinated, dewormed, and screened for infectious diseases. His picture is posted in the shelter and on the shelter website. The shelter cross-checks any reports of lost kittens. The foster parent (or, if the shelter has created one, an on-call foster kitten delivery service) arrives later that afternoon to transport the kitten to his foster home.

The intake staff schedule an appointment for the kitten to come in for an exam and to get neutered, revaccinated, and dewormed before being made available for adoption in two weeks. If the kitten is reunited with his lost family, the

appointments will be cancelled. This same scenario goes on multiple times a day, all week long.

In this example, a pathway of foster-to-adoption is planned even before the kitten enters the shelter system. Assignment to that category was made based on an understanding that the kitten was healthy, friendly, and too young for adoption. If circumstances change—for example, say that at intake, the staff discover the finder did not accurately describe the kitten—the pathway may change.

In this example, there are several critical points where the kitten will need some kind of care to be able to continue along the pathway toward adoption. The kitten will need an intake exam; pick up for fostering; foster care; an exam upon his return from foster care; neutering; and placement in an adoption housing unit (unless he gets adopted directly from his foster home). Waiting time at any of these points of care will cause the length of stay for the kitten to grow longer.

As the guidelines state, “Adequate staffing must be available to ensure that each critical point of service (e.g., vaccination or medical evaluation, spay/neuter surgery, or a physical move to adoption) is delivered promptly. Delays resulting in even one to two additional days of care may result in crowding and poor animal welfare in facilities that operate near maximum capacity. Expected demand for these critical points of service should be estimated based on the expected numbers of animals who will need each service and the length of time it takes to complete each procedure (e.g., number of animals needing evaluation or spay/neuter surgery prior to adoption).”

The worst place for a delay to occur is in the shelter. Kittens have higher susceptibility to disease and require specialized care to keep them healthy and happy. The best place to have delays would be while the kitten is in foster care—but even in foster care, extended stays will mean a longer time for space to open in that foster home, and thus a decrease in capacity. Additionally, in many communities, kittens tend to have the best chance of adoption when they are very young, so delays in making this kitten available may decrease his potential for adoption.



### The Planning Process

ARL-Boston has done an excellent job of planning this pathway to make its Foster On-Deck system work. Its first assessment was to compare intake numbers to likely outcomes for kittens. Based on previous years' statistics, the shelter believed it would be able to place most healthy kittens coming in—if it could keep them healthy.

Early in the year, well before kitten season, shelter staff evaluated data to estimate how many of the entering kittens would likely need foster care because they were stray or too young. ARL-Boston realized it would need, on average, the capacity to allow one litter each day to go to foster care throughout kitten season.

Tanguay and her team created a written plan, including a list of goals in several categories. (Their goals were comprehensive enough to include a category for foster parent appreciation—an important element of continued recruitment!) They proactively recruited foster homes, increasing capacity for care. They trained foster parents and assigned them to tiered levels of care difficulty. And they created the Foster On-Deck System, so that foster parents would be ready and waiting when kittens came in.

They created an online document that shows foster parents and ARL staff who is “up to bat” next. Foster parents can see where they are in the rotation, and make adjustments if they are going out of town or just need a little more rest “in the dugout” before taking on a new ball of kitten energy.

The shelter evaluated its staffing for intake procedures, allowing enough time for a thorough evaluation of kittens—including all the procedures necessary prior to foster placement. It recognized that intake capacity is crucial. If this initial critical flow-through point has inadequate capacity, then kittens would never even be able to get on the pathway.

The shelter also evaluated its capacity for spays and neuters, to be sure it would have adequate opportunity to provide surgery for foster kittens promptly when they returned from foster care. Shelter staff evaluated housing space in the adoptions area, to be sure returning kittens wouldn't wait “in the back” for space to become available. The shelter even reorganized its surgery schedule to allow for more Friday surgeries, to coincide with higher weekend adoption rates for kittens.

The volunteer-driven foster kitten delivery service is still on the ARL's goal sheet. It had been planned in case foster pickup in Boston's after-work rush hour was causing delays—but so far, kitten pickup hasn't been much of a problem, so the league has that element “on deck” itself for now!

Through careful planning, lifesaving capacity is maximized. Length of stay for kittens is minimized to what is only absolutely necessary, both in the shelter and in foster homes. Kittens stay healthy and get the enrichment and socialization they need, and the shelter has more time and space to “go to bat” for everyone else. **AS**

*To learn more about the population management strategies ARL-Boston has used, see the ASPCApro webinar from their series on the ASV's Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters at [tinyurl.com/3tyalng](http://tinyurl.com/3tyalng).*

