

The value of foster programs in saving lives. May 2011



This interview describes the foster program at the Dogs Homes of Tasmania, and its results. It also provides some suggestions for those thinking about starting a foster program to assist in animal rehoming.



Background - The Dogs Homes of Tasmania (DHT)

The DHT are Tasmania's largest dog welfare organisation dedicated to improving the life of all dogs.

The organisation is in its 60th year of caring for homeless and unwanted dogs and operates Dogs' Homes in Hobart, Burnie and Devonport. DHT also provide official pound facilities for nine Tasmanian Councils.

*"We are pro-dog. We are here to save dogs' lives, not to end them.
Our goal is: TOWARDS ZERO EUTHANASIA OF ALL REHOMEABLE DOGS.
There is NO time limit placed on dogs waiting to be adopted.
There is NO such thing as 'death row' here.
We are NOT funded by the State Government. We rely on the public for support.
We are a not for profit organisation.
We invite you to adopt from us instead of buying from a pet shop or disreputable breeder if you can provide a caring and permanent home – a dog is a life-time commitment."*

In June 2010 the DHT started a comprehensive Foster Program initiated by Cathy Crow, Foster Program Co-ordinator.

PA: When did you start the Foster program Cathy?

CC: "The program started in June 2010. We were able to work with a grant from the Elsie Cameron Foundation given through Animal Welfare League Qld as part of their "Getting to Zero" Program."

PA: And what prompted the start?

CC: "I lived in the USA for a while, and observed there how many rescues operated from a foster home system. On my return I saw that the Dogs' Homes of Tasmania would benefit by being able to foster dogs out that required extra socialisation, recovery from surgeries, relief from kennel stress or just making room when kennels were crowded (usually during winter months).

I spoke to members of the Dogs' Home Council who worked hard to put a proposal together for funding. This allowed us to hit the ground running and pay for the increased vetting that saving more dogs has required."

PA: How many foster people do you now have?

CC: "We currently have 67 regular foster carers state wide."

PA: The question people will be asking is 'What results has this program delivered?'

CC: "We are excited that the program has shown a marked decrease in euthanasia of dogs for behavioural and anxiety issues - in a very short period of time.



So far (May 2011) we have had approximately 180 dogs through the program with the majority of these (160) being adopted from foster care. Many of these are dogs that may not have made it through the system without the opportunity for special care!

About 8 dogs have undergone surgeries that would not have otherwise been attempted, and have subsequently been adopted. eg - amputation of limbs, cruciate repairs, hip surgery etc.

Young puppies (both litters and solo's) have been fostered to provide them with much needed socialisation skills before adopting to families.

One of the biggest successes for me is the rehoming of dogs that stress in the kennels, and are unlikely to be adopted within the kennel environment. This due to the way they present i.e. barking, jumping, hyper aroused when other dogs walk past.

Foster Care provides these dogs with the opportunity to be seen in a different environment within communities and neighbourhoods and allows their true personalities to shine through.

They wear their "adopt me" vests when they are out and about which creates a lot of interest in the dog, the Dogs' Home and the Foster Care program."

PA: What would you say are the challenges in managing a foster program of this type?

CC: "The greatest challenge is matching up the right carer and dog and we are very careful in this regard. We want the experience to be a success for both parties and that means ensuring that the carer has the skills and support they need to take on particular dogs.

We do home-checks before enlisting each carer and find that while many are willing to take on smaller dogs it is a constant challenge to find carers for the bigger, adolescent 'boofheads' that always need extra socialisation!

Maintaining records and communication with carers is essential and time consuming; we also offer 24 hour phone support which can only happen when the Program team members are willing to outlay a substantial amount of volunteer time!

One of the challenges is also the recruitment of capable carers because inevitably there are carers that end up adopting their foster dogs. This is not discouraged but does have to be monitored as resources are minimal and a lot of effort goes towards up-skilling carers.

Quality control is so important in a program such as this; it is really important to make sure you have good screening procedures for carers and a plan for any

emergency that might arise. It is far better to run a smaller program well than have the safety of dogs and carers compromised in a numbers game.”



PA: What lessons have you learnt along the way?

CC: “We put in a lot of research before we started and we haven't had any major issues!

We have learned though that there are two types of carers.

The first is doing it for the dog, understands that there may be issues to work through and is committed to helping them as best they can.

The second type loves the concept and wants to feel useful but isn't willing to take on the types of dogs requiring care - these people can severely drain resources!!!”!

PA: Cathy, what advice would you give to a shelter wanting to start such a foster program?

CC: “DO IT!

- Talk to other shelters and groups who offer foster programs and check out their paperwork and systems to see what is involved and which aspects might work for you. There are many different variations depending on the main purpose for your program.
- Have everything in place before recruiting carers.
- Identify the types of dogs who will be earmarked for foster care. ie is it just to create space or will there be special needs dogs involved as well?
- Examine the extra costs that running such a program might incur i.e. vetting (particularly emergency vetting out of hours), administration, and support for carers.
- Start small and grow with quality, we all need to be accountable for outreach programs and ensure they reflect positively on our shelters.

Our foster page on our web is <http://dogshomesoftas.com.au/events-and-programs/foster-care/>. There is more information there for people who need it”
Cathy Crow can be contacted on cathy.craw@dogshomesoftas.com.au

Katrina McDonald, CEO of the Dogs Homes of Tasmania says:

“Since the foster program started, there have been 180 dogs go through the program. Of these 160 have been rehomed – these are dogs that would otherwise probably not have been adopted.”

Note: draft template documents for Foster Programs (generously provided by the Seattle Animal Shelter, USA) can be obtained by writing to: info@deathrowpets.net