

Researchers discover way to boost shelter dog adoptions

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Lisa Gunter, who worked on the project at both Virginia Tech and Arizona State University, walks her dog, Sydney, in Roanoke, Virginia. Credit: Lee Friesland for Virginia Tech.

After a long day at work, you open the door to the place you call home. A chorus of furry happiness rushes toward you, the sound of unconditional canine love. With your return, your dog's world is whole.

Virginia Tech and Arizona State University researchers are working to help more [shelter dogs](#) experience this kind of love, safety, and happiness in an adoptive home.

The research team in Virginia Tech's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences found that implementing shorter-term fostering programs at animal shelters vastly improves adoptions for our canine friends.

Spending time with a dog is one of the most consistently effective ways to improve a dog's life in the shelter. Time out of the kennel with a person can reduce physiological measures of stress, as can a single night or more in a foster caregiver's home.

In this study, the researchers assessed the effects of outings of just a few hours and fostering stays of one to two nights on dogs' length of stay in the shelter and their adoption outcomes.

The researchers found that brief outings and temporary fostering stays increased dogs' likelihood of adoption by five and more than 14 times, respectively. The team also found that these programs were more successful when a greater proportion of community members were providing outings and stays to the shelters' dogs as well as when these programs were carried out by shelters with more resources.

While short in their duration, these fostering programs can make a big impact on the lives of shelter dogs.

Helping man's best friend

At Virginia Tech, the project was spearheaded by Erica Feuerbacher, associate professor in the School of Animal Sciences, and Lisa Gunter, assistant professor in the school who originally worked on the project as the Maddie's Fund Research Fellow at Arizona State University.

In previous work, the team investigated how outings and temporary fostering stays influenced dogs' stress and activity levels but did not consider if these experiences helped homeless canines find their forever homes. The answer, based on the research, is yes.

"It's a really exciting finding. Our prior work showed how beneficial sleepovers were for reducing dogs' stress," Feuerbacher said. "It's wonderful to know that it also helps them get adopted."

The results showed that for foster outings, about 4 percent of the people ended up adopting the dog. For overnight stays, the number increased to about 12 percent. Both results show that the vast majority of adopters were not the foster families.

"We saw that the majority of people adopting the dogs weren't the caregivers that were taking the dogs on outings or letting them stay in their homes. These dogs were being seen in the community, meeting new people, and caregivers were sharing their stories," Gunter said. "This increased exposure likely helped the dogs find their adopters."

Data was analyzed from 51 animal shelters in the United States on 1,955 dogs that received these fostering interventions as well as 25,946 dogs residing at these shelters that served as the study's controls. Over the grant's four-year lifespan, 85 shelter partners helped the research team carry out studies on brief outings, temporary stays, foster caregiving during the pandemic, weeklong fostering, and safety net fostering for pets whose owners were experiencing hardship.

While dogs' lengths of stay in this study were longer in comparison to dogs that did not receive a brief outing or temporary fostering, this difference was present prior to the intervention, suggesting that shelters are using these programs for dogs that need more help in finding homes. After going on an outing or fostering stay, dogs waited just 10 days to be

adopted.

"Our data show that these programs can help the dogs not only have an improved experience in the shelter, but also dramatically increase their likelihood of adoption, and for the shelters that get their communities involved in brief outings and temporary fostering stays, better performing programs," Gunter said.

Clive Wynne, at Arizona State University, led the project, who was assisted by Gunter when she was a research scientist at the university.

"It's great news that even short-term fostering has positive impacts on [shelter](#) dogs' welfare and helps them get adopted because there are so many dogs in shelters in the United States and even the best shelters are not good places for dogs to be living," Wynne said.

Future paw prints

The increase in dog adoptions with short-term foster programs underscores their value to local shelters, the researchers said. Their findings highlight the importance of having resources available to shelters to support these programs. These programs are not as easy for some shelters as they are for others—it takes support both financial and human.

"These kinds of fostering programs can save the lives of dogs in shelters," Gunter said. "Currently, shelters are struggling with dog adoptions, and we have evidence that these programs support placement into homes, which in turn can help shelters help more dogs."

Wynne also saw the future of this work as easy to implement for shelters.

"One of the beauties of this [program](#) of research is that the fostering intervention is relatively low cost for shelters," Wynne said. "More than anything else, what shelters need is education on how to implement fostering, and helping them with that was an important aspect of this research program."

The research is published in *Animals*.

More information: Lisa M. Gunter et al, The Influence of Brief Outing and Temporary Fostering Programs on Shelter Dog Welfare, *Animals* (2023). [DOI: 10.3390/ani13223528](https://doi.org/10.3390/ani13223528)

Provided by Virginia Tech

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