

WHAT IS FOSTER CARE?

Westie Rescue Michigan

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Foster dog Piper with Resident dog Jack

You may be considering volunteering to do foster care for Westie Rescue. And we are always looking for good homes to foster our Westies in need. But often the term "Foster Care" has a different meaning to different people. Unfortunately, many people who want to do foster care have the idea that this means babysitting a sweet, little dog for a few days. And sometimes, the motive in volunteering is to use it as a method to screen for a dog that the foster home can adopt. Before you fill out the foster care application, we would like to help you understand the "reality" of foster care and what would be expected of you.

TYPES OF DOGS IN FOSTER CARE

In Michigan's Westie Rescue program, we foster ALL dogs who come in for placement. This means that we will get nice little dogs with minimal issues and also those dogs with special needs or concerns which make them harder to place. Even the nice little dogs, though, often have some minor issues to work with. For instance, they may never have been crated in their life and need to learn to be comfortable in a crate. Sometimes they come in to foster care eating a diet that consists of table scraps or cat food and have to be converted to a good quality dog food. Some very good owners never quite get their little dog housebroken. Sometimes the dogs coming in have larger problems. And sometimes we are surprised by a real issue because the owner didn't admit to it when surrendering the dog. The dogs in foster care usually have at least one issue which requires some work on the part of the foster care giver. And sometimes this problem is large enough to require that the dog stay for a long time period, perhaps even months. Situations we may see when fostering:

- Dog has a medical condition that makes it hard to place; we need to foster until we find a placement (For example, we have had cases of skin problems and Addison's disease and other similar situations.)
- Dog has housebreaking problems and needs to be retrained
- Dog marks and needs to be retrained
- Dog has shown signs of aggression but we think it may be its current environment (Note: If the dog proves to be truly aggressive, we will not continue to foster it; it will be put down)
- Dog has been through a trauma which requires time for bonding and then

retraining to resolve

- Dog was in kill shelter and had to be moved quickly; could be any age and in any condition
- Dog came from a puppy mill raid; may require a couple of weeks of isolation in your home before integrating to your family area.
- Dog may have come from a nice, normal home and we are just fostering to be sure no one will be surprised by an issue after placement.

ADOPTION OF FOSTER DOGS

We do not refuse to allow a foster home to adopt a foster dog. We understand that sometimes you may become too attached to give the dog up. And since we have already screened you for foster care, your home already meets our standards for adoption. BUT we do attach a string. Foster homes are very hard to come by. We don't want to lose a foster home because you have so many dogs that you can't care for a foster dog any longer. And we do not want people who volunteer to foster simply to get to the head of the list. So, we ask that you commit to continue fostering even after adopting the dog. If you apply to adopt a foster dog, we will consider all factors normally considered along with your ability to continue fostering after the adoption.

FOSTER HOME IDEALS AND GOALS

Following are a series of requirements, suggestions and ideals for the care of a foster dog. These are what we should all be "shooting for" in the care of a foster dog. None of us will be able to do all of these things all of the time but we should be trying to incorporate these things to the best of our ability and as our life styles allow.

LOVING CARE

What could be more important than loving care? This doesn't mean you need to truly feel love for every dog. In fact, to some extent you must take care not to bond too closely or you will find it difficult to stay in foster care. BUT there is a myth that you should not allow a foster dog to bond to you. The thought is that the dog has already had to break one bond and when he leaves you, he will have to break another bond. This is "human think". Dogs don't seem to respond this way at all. What happens instead is that when a Westie learns that he can trust you and bonds with you, it makes it easier for him to transfer that bond to his new human when the time comes. The transitions you went through initially may not evidence themselves in the new home because this time he has learned to trust and doesn't need to do as much testing.

This doesn't mean that you spoil the dog to death. It is a good medium point to treat the dog well, cuddle him and allow him to sleep beside you while you are reading or working. But leave some room for the next home to be "even better" in his mind. A good example is to not let the dog sleep in your bed.

SLEEPING ARRANGEMENTS

You never know how the new home will handle sleeping arrangements. If it turns out that they plan to crate the dog at night, you have created a problem if you allow the foster

dog to sleep in your bed. It is better to train them to sleep in a crate at night. Then the permanent home can make their own decision about where the dog will sleep and he will be able to adjust to whatever they decide.

Another reason for not allowing the dog in your bed is that it can encourage the dog to feel as though it can challenge you for Alpha. If the dog is a dominant dog, you DO NOT want him or her in your bed. It will make your life harder 24 hours a day because the dog will not see you as boss.

And finally, you don't really know this dog yet. Before we learned this lesson we had a couple of instances where the foster dog was startled in his sleep and snapped at a moving object. In both cases these dogs connected but it really wasn't their fault. We didn't know them well enough to let them sleep with us. Keep that dog in a crate at night.

If the dog objects to the crate, put it in another room and close the door so you can ignore the barking. Give the dog something such as Calms before he goes in the crate for the first couple of nights if he is agitated. Don't put him to bed early. Stay up as late as you can so that he will be very sleepy. When you crate the dog, put him in the crate by dropping a treat in the back of the crate. Cover the crate so he cannot see outside. This helps him to "den". Once he is in the crate, don't give in to his barking. If you do, you are re-enforcing his behavior. (Always remove the collar, especially if it has dangling tags!!) Occasionally, the dog simply will not be crated. Use an ex-pen. But the dog may not be allowed to stay loose. Crating is absolutely necessary whenever you are not in the home both for the safety of the dog and your dogs and for the protection of your belongings. We will not be responsible for any damage done when the dog is not crated and/or supervised.

FOOD

We really encourage all foster homes to research the quality of dog food that you are feeding to your own dogs. Please give serious consideration to changing to a "human grade" food. There are new foods coming out all of the time which makes it difficult to maintain a written list here. Please talk to us about what we feed our dogs.

If you get a dog with allergies or skin issues, we have separate documents specifically to deal with this. Please make sure you ask for help.

When feeding the foster, we would like this dog also to be on a high quality dog food. When the dog is adopted, please provide at least 1 pound of dog food so that the new owners can use that until they get their own supply or can slowly change the dog over to whatever they are feeding. Give them information about the dog food to encourage them to consider the switch to a human quality food. And make sure they know where they can buy the same brand.

EXERCISE

All dogs need some exercise. If you can do so, please try to take the dog for a walk each day. If that isn't practical, then make sure they can get out into the yard and run around each day. But be sure they are protected by fencing or a dog run.

GROOMING

Dogs need to be able to handle some daily grooming. Try to do the following daily:

- Brush or comb the dog
- Brush the dog's teeth
- Handle the dog's feet; if you can't clip their nails, check them and have it done professionally
- Bathing the dog can be a bit intimidating. But they often need it when you get them. Keep a muzzle handy just in case it is needed. Consider getting a "third arm".....a suction cup devise which has a coated metal wire that loops over his neck and keeps him in the tub. (I've seen them at www.revivalanimal.com for about \$5). Keep treats handy and, if possible, ask another person for help. Most will do just fine.

A well-groomed dog is more easily placed. It also provides a new experience which may teach us more about the dog. It helps to be able to tell the owners how the dog behaved while being groomed so be sure to ask the groomer. Also always tell the groomer that the dog is a foster and it is acceptable if they need to muzzle the dog. Tell them our first concern is their safety. When you groom the dog, try to keep the head and skirts if at all possible. But if the dog is extremely matted, don't make the dog suffer through having the mats removed....shave them off. It is just hair and will re-grow! (You can often get mats out using a product called "Cowboy Magic".)

- Leash/collar – Rescue provides a Westie leash and collar for each foster dog. If you have a dog who must have a harness or who is too small or large for our leash and collar, we will pay for the appropriate equipment.

DOG TAGS

When you get a foster dog, immediately put a tag on it that gives your phone number so that if the dog is lost while in your care, you will have a chance to get it back. (It works quite well to put white adhesive tape on the collar and write the information on that; this also has the advantage of not dangling.) Each new foster home will get Boomerang Tags from us. If you did not get your own tags, please let Barb Engerer know so she can order them for you.

REHABILITATION

Obviously we can't address every case here since they are all somewhat unique. When the dog's situation is known, please review the articles at www.thedogspeaks.com. We will supply each foster home with the Ebook by Deb Duncan. You will be asked to join our Foster Group email list. Please do join and address questions and problems to this group. We all learn from sharing our experiences. If your situation is one which we can't address ourselves from our previous experiences, we will ask you to contact Deb Duncan and ask for her advice. Deb has helped us in many previous cases and will often even follow

through to talking to the adoptive home. Please share her advice with us on the email list.

If you don't know the dog well, you may not find out about some of his problems unless you put him in new situations. For example, it is hard for me to find out if a dog does well with kids because I don't have kids at my home. But I can find places where he can see kids and I can see his reaction without taking risks. The same may be true of male visitors for some. It is impossible to be sure a dog is cured of his problems if you don't set him up for some of those situations while he is in foster care. This means making time and taking a special effort with him. But this is the difference between truly fostering and simply babysitting.

Some thoughts:

SOCIALIZATION

If the dog has socialization problems and you don't have a lot of visitors to your home, you might take the dog to a local strip mall and walk the dog there. When people approach, they may want to pet. If you don't feel confident that the dog can handle that, ask them to give the dog a treat instead (keep them in your pocket in hopes this will happen.) Have them lay the treat on the sidewalk in front of the dog but make sure he sees that this good stuff is coming from all of these strange and various people. Keep the dog on leash and under control and don't take risks. But gradually allow the dog to learn that people are good. The dog can also be taken to the local pet store but kept on leash.

CAR

You will see helpful information on getting a dog used to a car by reading the article on this site called, "Traveling Westies". Using this information, get the dog into the car and give him good car experiences. Take the dog to the park whenever possible. Try taking him through the car wash. Any time a foster dog is in the car, it must be in the back seat away from the air bags and it must be restrained either in a seat belt harness or a crate.

TRAINING

You probably won't have the dog long enough to do formal training with him. But everyone can do some minor training. Examples are:

- SIT
- DOWN
- STAY
- SIT AND STAY AT THE DOOR
- "LEAVE IT" WHILE WALKING

These are all things that will help the new owners with the dog and will help to keep the dog safe. Most Westies will learn these things at an incredible pace. Occasionally you may have one who has had an unusual life and may not be immediately ready for anything much more than sit. We have had some dogs who lived their lives in a barn. When they came into foster care, they were not capable of learning these things immediately. They had so much other "stuff" to absorb

that training just had to be set aside. After a week, one of them learned to sit and stay and sit/stay at the door but still could not handle down. But each dog is different and has a different background. These guys were unusual. On the other hand, I've seen some who could, within a week, also do

- SHAKE HANDS
- LEAVE IT (leave a treat on the floor until you told him ok)

And this did not mean spending a lot of time on these things. These dogs are very smart and they do like to use their brains. They are very proud of themselves when they are given the opportunity to show off. And it teaches them a lot of other things than just the trick. A dog who can "leave it" or "sit/stay at the door" is showing a lot of self control.

FOOD AGGRESSION

If a dog comes to you and you find he is food aggressive, there are things to do to fix this. First, is he aggressive to humans or just other dogs? Second, is his aggression at the food dish only or over all treats too? When you find a dog with these concerns, we can send you a memo from Deb Duncan to help you work through these problems.

WEIGHT

If you realize the dog is overweight or if your vet tells you the dog is overweight, please immediately take steps to get that excess weight off the dog. This can mean cutting back on his food, taking more walks. Usually the main culprit is TOO MANY TREATS. If you are using treats for training, take away some amount of his normal food to balance it out. In fact, for many dogs, you can do the training when he is hungry and use his actual kibble as the treats. OVERWEIGHT DOGS DIE YOUNGER!!!

PHOTOS

PLEASE take out your camera and take photos for a memory book. Get some early on and some later. Try to get some of the foster brothers/sisters and other doggie or kitty friends your foster might meet. It makes a great gift for the new owners to see their dog while he was in foster care. Also, if it becomes necessary to list the dog on the Petfinder, the photos make all the difference. And if there is a medical situation for which National or WestieMed might get involved, they need before and after photos. Always get a really good head shot for our newsletter, calendar, online photo album and fundraising use. Email the best photo in large size to Beth for these uses. Email smaller versions of many photos to the email list for sharing with the group.

VET CHECKS

FOR THE PROTECTION OF YOU AND YOUR PETS, always take the dog to the vet as soon as possible after receiving the dog. Please use the Medical Checklist in the Foster Guide to be sure all items are covered.

NEUTER/SPAY

All dogs must be neutered or spayed if they are not already. While the dog is under, the vet can do a dental, insert the microchip, do many of the vaccinations, x-rays when needed, etc. We prefer the dental be done at the same time as the neuter/spay if both are needed.

OTHER PROBLEMS

If the dog exhibits any problems that might be medical in nature, we want to see the vet. An example is if the dog is urinating a lot, have the vet check for any medical cause.

DETAILS

1) Take all available medical records with you and give them to the vet staff to determine what the dog needs to bring it up to date on shots and if there are any other problems for which the dog is being treated (e.g., special diet, regular medications etc.)

If no medical records or records are incomplete or you are not certain of how to read the records, BUT we know the name and location or number of original vet, when you make the appointment, give this information to the vet staff and ask them to call and gather all information required prior to the appointment.

If no medical records and we don't know anything about the old vet, then assume the worst and do everything needed to bring the dog up to date. This can mean giving the dog his shots twice but we don't have any choice.

Pass on ALL records at time of adoption including those from your vet; one copy to Rescue and original to the adopter BUT MAKE SURE THE ORIGINAL OWNER INFORMATION HAS BEEN REMOVED.

2) If the dog is exhibiting any sort of problem, have that checked out specifically, e.g., limp, peeing, possible pain in some area, ear rubbing, scratching etc. Tell the vet what is happening and then follow his/her recommendations.

Note: If the dog has any skin/allergy issues, take a copy of our treatment procedure to the vet when you go. This is the preferred method of handling these issues. It can be found in the Foster Guide. In some cases steroids are justified but in many cases some vets are very quick to jump to steroids before trying anything else. Insist the vet review our treatment plan. We will not put a dog on long-term steroids as a treatment method.

It would be of benefit to discuss any kind of problem with the rest of the group to gather facts before going to the vet. You will understand more of what the vet is saying if you have a concept of the problem beforehand. An example of this was the research we did on a dog's limp before she went to the vet. We knew quite a bit about luxated patellas before the vet saw her.

3) If you are going in knowing that surgery is necessary (e.g., spaying and neutering) or the vet recommends a dental be done, make the arrangements. Have the vet do a full blood panel first. This helps to ensure that the surgery will be safe and will also give us more confidence that the dog is healthy before we adopt it out. If the surgery

recommendation is unexpected, please check back first with Rescue and discuss the problem and the reasons for the recommendation AND projected costs and probable outcome (e.g., likelihood of survival, after effects.) Note: We now do a blood panel on all dogs so that we can provide the results to the adopter and the adopter's vet as a baseline. If the dog is elderly, we do a more complete blood panel.

4) Put the foster dog on either Sentinel or the same heartworm prevention as your dog. Buy 2 month's worth of the medication on the assumption that you will use one and hand one off to the new owner (of course, do the heartworm testing first). If the dog is in foster care longer, you can always pick up an extra pill later. We generally use Sentinel because it kills a lot of internal parasites that these dogs sometimes come in with. That further protects your dog.

NOTE: The reason for this is that the new owner is far more likely to get to the vet and keep up the prevention if we can hand them one tablet and give them instructions to give it on such and such a date and to get to the vet to renew it before the next month's date comes around. If we don't hand them anything, they are less likely to get themselves to the vet right away. A lot of adopters are new to dogs and don't necessarily realize that this needs to be done. And, of course, we would prefer to know if the dog has heartworm before we adopt it out.

Summary

Fostering is a lot of work but is also very rewarding. While we talk about all of these potential problems, most dogs come into the home and fit in so well, it is hard for the foster home to give them up when the time comes. Almost every foster home has adopted at one point or another. So don't let the negative aspects discourage you from doing this. But do pay attention to them and go into this process intelligently. Know that there is an organization behind you who will offer advice and support. And know that the more people who do this work, the lighter the overall load becomes on everyone.