

Friendly Finder Playbook

Introduction

Over the past several years, Friendly Finder programs (sometimes called Finder to Foster, First 48, or Good Samaritan programs) have proven to be an effective solution for communities to efficiently reunite lost pets with their families — helping keep people and pets together. These programs engage the community that loves pets and wants to help, and free up valuable shelter resources for the pets in the community who need it most.

Program Overview

More and more shelters are engaging the community in a more positive way to help return lost pets back home, increasing the number of fosters in their community and reducing the volume of pets entering the shelter — reserving shelter capacity for those who need it most and reuniting more lost pets with their families.

“Friendly Finder”-type programs ask community members to hold onto a pet for at least two days after being found, while searching for their home.

These programs are a positive progression from what's been standard practice for decades, with animal shelters telling the public to bring lost or stray pets to them regardless of the situation. Unfortunately, this standard practice has led to hundreds of thousands of healthy and treatable animals being killed every year in shelters that don't have the resources — or lifesaving programs — to save these pets' lives.

Instead, Friendly Finder programs present a responsible solution that helps control the flow of animals coming into shelters, allowing shelters to better manage scarce resources. They create more positive outcomes for pets, while also promoting public safety.

These programs also understand a crucial point: The public wants to help animals. If people didn't care, they wouldn't secure a lost pet in the first place, or call the shelter looking for help.

While shelters bear the responsibility of supporting the pets in the community, they also have the responsibility to engage the community in supporting their work. Friendly Finder programs don't prevent shelters from taking lost pets. Instead, they offer another, often better option for pets and the public to support them.

Friendly Finder-style programs can help lost pets get home by keeping them in the neighborhoods where they were found — and where their homes are likely to be. For dogs, [research shows](#) that most free-roaming dogs are more often "loose owned" and less often truly "stray." Thus, in most cases, there is a home for them to go to. Research

also suggests that [dogs are commonly found close to home](#). Roughly 70% of found dogs were found within a mile of their home — and 42% were within a city block of their home.

We also know through research that these dogs are more likely to be reunited with their home if they are able to remain in the neighborhood where they were found, likely close to where they live, instead of going to the shelter, which is often across town in a remote location.

By allowing the public a better opportunity to help, we can get more dogs returned home, and save shelter resources for the pets who need it most.

Program Composition

Step One: Triage

When a member of the public finds an animal and contacts the shelter, it's best to have a conversation that helps determine the best path forward so you can [triage the situation](#).

Is the animal already confined? Are they behaving aggressively and seem to be a threat to the finder? Is the animal in good health? Questions like these will help guide the conversation, and the plan for the pet.

In some situations, immediate entry to the shelter may be the best solution. This includes where the pet is a threat to public safety, appears to be sick or injured, or is otherwise in immediate danger.

If the dog is acting aggressively, an officer response may be required to safely secure the dog. However, if a pet is safely confined, not a threat to the public, and in good health, a Friendly Finder program may be a preferred solution.

Because the community member wants to help (remember, they helped secure the dog in the first place!) they may be willing to foster for a few days to help create the best possible outcome for the pet.

Talk with the finder so they understand your Friendly Finder program — what is entailed and why it is important. Help them understand that keeping the pet in the neighborhood is the most likely way the dog will get back home — the best possible outcome.

In Williamson County, Texas, people who reach out to the shelter after finding lost pets are presented with three Friendly Finder options:

- If a caregiving family is identified, deliver the lost pet to the family to be reunited.
- Foster a lost pet until they are reunited with their family.
- Surrender the found pet to the shelter and post “found” flyers in their neighborhood so people know the pet is at the shelter.

Step Two: The Finder Becomes a Foster

Dogs

If the finder is able and willing to help, you can turn them into a temporary foster home for the pet. If they are not, you can place the pet in another temporary foster home or intake them into the shelter, as appropriate.

Best Friends does *not* endorse telling finders to just set dogs loose if they are unwilling or unable to keep them. This is not helping the public or the lost animal.

Take these steps in cases where the finder will be fostering the pet:

First, a shelter or animal services member should record the contact information and sign waivers stating that if the pet’s family is found, the finder will return the pet to that person. This can alleviate concerns over ownership if conflict later arises.

The shelter should record the pet’s information and have a picture of the found pet on file in case the caregiver visits the shelter looking for their pet. Provide basic intake protocols such as microchipping, deworming, etc. **Post a listing on the shelter’s lost and found page**, too.

Have the pet scanned for a microchip. This can be done by the shelter, at a vet’s office, a fire station, or even at one of the [scanner stations that some communities have placed in public parks](#) (with instructions on how to use).

Shelters should a clear, step by step checklist for locating the pet’s family — like by taking the dog on a walk throughout the neighborhood and talking to neighbors and neighborhood kids. Finders can also be encouraged to go door-to-door in the area where the dog was found and speak to neighbors and local businesses to see if they recognize the found dog.

DONE	Checklist for Pet Finders
	Check for visible ID <i>(if no tag, take off their collar and look around or under for an engraving or writing)</i>
	Walk the pet around the area the pet was found and ask neighbors if they recognize the pet <i>(nearly half of pets are found within a block of their home)</i>
	Post pet's photo on petcolovelost.org
	Post pet's photo on social channels with location missing/found
	File a found pet report with your local shelter
	Scan pet for microchip
	Make flyers and post around the neighborhood
	Go back to posts and check for comments, messages, and responses

Provide templates to the finder for posting the found pet to local social media platforms. These can include templates for lost pet forums, neighborhood groups, Nextdoor, and Petco Love Lost. **Provide templates for them to hang physical door hangers,** too.

Offer to help the finder with supplies such as a dog crate, a collar, leash, food, and toys, just as you would any foster.

After a few days have passed, if the pet's family is not found, talking to the finder again will help determine next steps. They may want to foster for a few more days, or weeks — or even adopt the pet once they are available. They may be willing to bring the pet in for vaccinations and bring them back a week or so later to help ensure the health of the dog when it is in the shelter (If this wasn't done during the initial shelter visit).

If the finder is no longer willing or able to foster, set an appointment for them to bring the dog back to the shelter and take them into the shelter's care. Use the time to get as much information as you can about the dog's behavior in their home, to help you find a new placement.

For Friendly Finder programs, supporting finders is vitally important. By providing them supplies and helping them promote that they've found a lost pet you can help them feel supported and connected to the work of the shelter — and increase the likelihood of the pet being returned home.

Shelters should maintain records of final outcomes for pets who are a part of their program to measure program efficacy and determine if adjustments are needed for better results.

These guidelines are a jumping off point. You can do even more, if you are able! In Williamson County, Texas, for example, they give a free t-shirt to their finders to celebrate their support and treat them as they would any other foster for the organization.

Don't forget: Communication about the program is extremely important — both with finders and the public.

The primary focus in these discussions is not only to explain the programs, but to explain *why* this program is in the best interest of the loose animals. If people realize that being foster finders means dogs are more likely to be returned home than if they go right to the shelter, many will be more likely to help than if they think the shelter is just telling them “no,” they won't take them.

Additionally, there are many benefits for the pets by reunifying them without coming into the shelter, including reduced stress for the pet, reduced risk of sickness or disease, and shelters can learn more about the pets in a home environment, which can help with any future marketing. In many cases, it may be valuable to promote the program publicly as a shelter works to reset the public's expectations and needs when a pet is found.

As a shelter develops their Friendly Finder program, it is important that information on what to do when you find a lost pet is made clear and available on the shelter or animal services website to set expectations and support finders through the process.

A couple of great examples [are Cabot Animal Support Services' Found Pets](#) page and [Williamson County Animal Services' Found Pets](#).

Cats & Neonatal Kittens

Friendly Finder programs tend to be far more common for dogs than for cats. Cats have very low return-to-home rates at shelters (less than 3%). Because of this, most organizations will generally [recommend returning cats to where they are found](#) because they will most likely find their way back home — or because they are already in their outdoor home.

Due to their underdeveloped immune systems and level of care they require, neonatal kittens are uniquely vulnerable and highly susceptible to illness and death in a shelter environment. Because of this, triage for neonatal kittens operates differently than for dogs and older cats.

For neonatal kittens, if the kitten appears healthy and a mother is present, it is usually best to return the kitten to their mother, where they can get the care they need. If there is no mother present, turning the finder into a foster can be exceptionally valuable in getting the kitten the necessary care without subjecting them to the shelter environment.

As with other Foster Finders, providing resources is vitally important. Having kitten kits with heating pads and helping teach finders how to feed will set them up to help create a positive outcome for their new foster kitten. For more information, check out our [Neonatal Kitten Toolkit](#).

Finding Resources

Some shelter leaders may read about this program and think, “I don’t have the resources to do that.” However, remember that in most cases, the alternative to a Friendly Finder program is intake. Thus, the shelter will be providing food, water, and daily care for this pet while also posting lost pet information and looking for their family. The cost of care can quickly add up.

In addition to saving the shelter time and money caring for and reunifying pets, it helps the shelter more effectively use its funding and allocation of resources by supporting the public in helping be a part of this solution.

Also, because the needs of finders are often consistent, it may be easy to get donations from the community to help with needed supplies. Communicate the value of the program to the community and don’t be afraid to ask for help.

The Shelter Taking Ownership of the Pet

This can be done at any point in the process. Some shelters choose to enter the lost pet into their system as soon as they come in contact with the finder. Others may only take ownership if the finder is unable to reunite the pet with the family after the community stray-hold. Either system works and shelter leaders should do whatever works best for their shelters and their communities.

Proven Results: Cabot, Arkansas

In 2021, the first year of implementing their First 48 program, Cabot's version of Foster Finder, 70% of finders were willing to participate.

Of those who chose to participate in the program, 65.5% of pets were able to be reunited with their families.

31.3% of pets were brought into the shelter at the end of the 48 hours.

1% of participants chose to adopt their foster, when the pet was not returned to their original home.

Total participants with no response: 0.6%*.

* Note: Many shelters have concerns that finders may not return a dog if a caregiver comes forward. However, this has seldom been the case in communities that operate these types of programs, with most people wanting to participate and to get lost pets back home. Collecting the finder's full name and contact information, and asking them to sign waivers, can dramatically reduce the risk of this concern.

Sample Procedure and Program Information Documents

[Cabot \(Arkansas\) First 48 Protocol](#)

[Cabot \(Arkansas\) First 48 Talking Points](#)

[Cabot \(Arkansas\) After the First 48 intake form](#)

[Williamson County \(Texas\) Finder to Uniter SOP](#)

[Williamson County \(Texas\) Found Animal Form](#)

[Williamson County \(Texas\) Finder Options](#)

Williamson County [Signage](#) & [T-Shirts](#)

[Pinal County Finder to Foster SOP](#)