

The Key to Giving Older Pets a Second Chance at Life

Many older pets with chronic health issues are relinquished, making these animals more likely to spend their remaining days confined in a shelter. This nonprofit animal welfare charity has discovered a way to get these unfortunate pets back out into new loving homes, creating a win-win for all.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

Jan 4, 2023 • 5 min read

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- In Nova Scotia, Canada, the SPCA is finding homes for older dogs with medical issues through the genius of their Palliative Care Program
- The Palliative Care Program covers all the medical costs for dogs who qualify; the only requirement of foster families is that they provide a loving home and the basics
- Many dogs relinquished to Nova Scotia's SPCA shelters due to age and/or health issues go on to live their best lives after their medical needs are addressed and they're placed in loving foster homes

Way back in 2009, a 14-year-old mixed breed dog named Darla was dropped off at a Dartmouth, Nova Scotia shelter run by the Nova Scotia SPCA, a nonprofit animal welfare charity.

Poor Darla was "abandoned at the shelter by someone that kind of dumped her in the cat adoption room and ran," said Sandra Flemming, provincial director of animal care for SPCA Nova Scotia. Shelter staff was concerned that no one would adopt the dog.

"They kind of looked at me going, how are we going to place this dog with all of her medical needs and her age?" Flemming told CBC News.¹

Darla became the inspiration for a **Palliative Care Program** that covers medical expenses for animals with chronic illnesses so they can spend the remainder of their lives in loving homes instead of shelters. The Nova Scotia SPCA, which sponsors the program, is seeing more people foster older pets thanks to the program.

"We found that when we had really senior animals with a lot of veterinary care needed, that the best way we could get them into a loving home was through our Palliative Care Program and it just kind of grew organically from there," said Flemming.

Dozens of Pets Now Live in Their 'Retirement Foster Homes'

More older animals are being surrendered now than when the program started in 2009. According to Flemming, the SPCA's ongoing efforts to spay/neuter pets, coupled with the increased cost of living, has led to more older dogs with medical needs winding up in shelters in the province.

The only qualifier for potential fosters for animals with significant health issues is that they can provide a loving home where the pet's needs will be met. And as Flemming points out, there are lots of reasons to provide a home for an older animal.

"A lot of people look at owning an animal thinking, 'I would love to have a pet, I would love to give my time and love and energy to an animal,' but maybe they're senior themselves, maybe they don't want a long-term commitment of a young animal," said Flemming.

"Maybe they don't want the work of a puppy, they'd prefer an animal that sleeps the majority of the day, such as a senior dog, and they're looking for something easy to take for walks and they're looking for companionship. But maybe they financially can't afford an animal long-term.

So being part of the Palliative Care Program allows them to give back, help an animal, have some companionship, but no financial costs associated with their care."

The program, which is offered at all SPCA shelters in Nova Scotia, averages 75 to 100 pets living in their retirement foster homes.

Quality Care, a Loving Home, and a Second Chance at Life

Chewie, a 10-year-old Pomeranian and **Fred**, an 11-year-old Chihuahua, are living their best senior lives in the home of Jennifer Nolan of Halifax. Both dogs have a heart condition that requires medication. Nolan decided to foster them during 2022 while volunteering at the SPCA's Dartmouth shelter and told CBC News she couldn't have done it without the Palliative Care Program.

"Chewie actually came to me as a stray," said Nolan. "He was picked up, kind of just running out at large. He was brought in, in not the best condition, but you think where would he be if no one had found him or ... if the SPCA wasn't able to take on the medical costs."

Flemming believes the Palliative Care Program gives animals a second chance at life.

"Sometimes even with senior pets, once they are on the right medication and once they are on good quality food and once they're in a loving home, a lot of them have really kind of reversed aging," she said.

"So animals that we thought came in and that looked so poor and downtrodden, so many of them, when they're given just all of those little things that improve their overall quality and health, they turn around. And you think that they're on their last legs, but they actually end up being in the Palliative Care Program for years."

A New Leash on Life: Meet Buster and Biscuit

Buster arrived at the SPCA shelter as a stray 10-year-old dog with vision and hearing loss, a tender, bloated belly, and a severely matted coat. The shelter staff was concerned the little guy's spirit was broken, as he seemed very sad and rarely interacted with people.

Buster was ultimately diagnosed with Cushing's disease and placed in the Palliative Care Program. He gradually learned to trust people and found a home with a young couple looking for a small older dog. **Buster's transformation** has been remarkable, and he's now "happy, full of life and love," according to his foster parents.²

Buster's foster mom, Stepheny Hunter, says "the Palliative Care Program is perfect for us as lower income young adults who can't always afford the medical expenses that come along with having a pet. If you're thinking of getting a pet, I'd highly recommend this amazing program. It gives animals in need a second chance to have a loving family and we're so grateful the program brought Buster into our life!"

The first 12 years of **Biscuit's** life were far from ideal. He arrived at the SPCA Colchester Shelter as a thin, matted, senior dog with cataracts and a heart condition. He was very withdrawn, staying at the back of his kennel and keeping his head low. The little cutie was diagnosed with a 4/5 grade heart murmur and placed in the Palliative Care Program.

Foster mom Jessica says, "Biscuit stole my heart the first time I met him. He seemed to gravitate towards me like I was his safe place."³ Since he would be their first palliative care pet, Jessica called a family meeting.

"We had a family discussion since it's a big decision to make when you have small children," she explains. "My kids completely understand that Biscuit won't be with us for a long time, but they know that we can give him the best life we can while he is still here."

Once Biscuit was in his new home, the family learned that he needed to be housetrained, loved the kids and the cats but was timid around the man of house, and was a bit hand-shy. The **current day Biscuit** is living his best life.

"His favorite activities include days at the beach and long car drives," says Jessica. "He recently learned how to swim and got the biggest smile on his face as if to say, 'Hey mom, look what I can do!'"

Jessica hopes her story will encourage others to consider opening their hearts to a homeless palliative care animal.

"It's one of the most rewarding things you can do," she said. "We feel so humbled to be able to give this little guy a second chance at the loving home he deserved in the first place. We may have met him late in his life, but we will make it his best life while he is here."

Sources and References

¹ [CBC News, October 23, 2022](#)

² [Nova Scotia SPCA, November 16, 2018](#)

³ [Nova Scotia SPCA, September 18, 2019](#)
