

Kittens Are the Most Easily Placed of All Homeless Pets, Yet Also the Most Euthanized

People fall in love with these adorable creatures and open their homes to them almost more than with any other pet. However, if they don't fall into the 'adoptable' range, they're often euthanized. But now this new solution springing up across the US is saving innocent lives.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Kittens are among the easiest shelter animals to find homes for, but sadly, kittens too young for adoption are routinely killed because few shelters can provide the intensive round-the-clock nursing care they require
- In the past few years, shelter-sponsored cat foster care programs have gained significant momentum
- One effective solution to the problem is kitten nurseries. These are special areas set up by existing shelters to provide 24/7 care to kittens up to 8 weeks of age
- The nurseries employ staff and dozens or even hundreds of volunteers, including foster guardians, to nurture the kitties through their first 2 months of life or until they are ready for adoption
- A number of kitten nurseries have opened across the U.S. in the past few years. Some of the guidelines that have been established include insuring there is enough local volunteer interest to provide 24-hour care to the kittens, and creating a separate space for the nursery away from the general shelter population

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A very sad fact: kittens are among the most easily placed of all homeless pets, but kittens too young for adoption have the highest euthanasia rates in many shelters. This is due primarily to the extremely high level of care these tiny babies require just to make it from one day to the next.

Saving the lives of orphaned kittens is not something most animal shelters have been able to accomplish on a large scale. Due to the 24-hour nursing care required by very young kittens, it's a job that has been better handled by small rescue groups and committed foster guardians.

Fortunately, that situation is changing. In the past few years, shelter-sponsored cat foster care programs have gained significant momentum, and along with them, the establishment of kitten nurseries designed to care for the tiniest and most vulnerable victims of the U.S. homeless cat population. According to Dr. Martha Smith-Blackmore of the Animal Rescue League of Boston:

“Kitten nurseries take life-saving to the next level for animal shelters. Newborn kittens are precious and delicate. By providing a dedicated care space and caregivers, animal shelters can save vastly more lives for the most vulnerable animals among us.”¹

And the nurseries meet more than just the kittens' physical needs. The socialization period for kittens is from 2 to 7 weeks of age. The handling and attention the kittens get while in the nursery helps make them more adoptable.

Kitten Nurseries Coast-to-Coast

“Kitten season,” which typically occurs during the spring and summer months, varies in length depending on location. In warm, sunny locales like Southern California and Florida, kitten nurseries are needed year-round. In areas of the country with winter weather, the nurseries operate on a seasonal basis.

- At **Austin Pets Alive**, a no-kill shelter in Austin, TX, the neonatal kitten nursery is nicknamed the Bottle Baby Nursery Program because it was designed around wildlife rehabilitation principles. The program was created to care for orphaned, unweaned kittens destined for euthanasia at Central Texas shelters.

The APA Nursery opened in 2011, and in 2012, saved over 2,000 kittens. In 2013, the shelter separated the nursery into three separate quarantined areas to reduce the spread of illness among the kittens.

- The **San Diego Humane Society and SPCA** opened its kitten nursery in 2009 and has cared for over 6,000 kittens in its five years of operation. The nursery takes in litters of stray kittens, litters brought in by owners, and kittens from other shelters that don't have the resources to care for them.

The nursery employs 24 staff members and 20 volunteers, and can care for up to 250 kittens at a time. It is divided into three areas to accommodate kittens from birth to 2 weeks, kittens 2 to 4 weeks, and kittens 5 to 8 weeks.

- Three organizations in Jacksonville, FL collaborated to create a kitten nursery. The **Jacksonville Humane Society** donated a building and staff, including a veterinarian. First Coast No More Homeless Pets had grant money from Best Friends Animal Society to contribute. Both groups had volunteers ready to help. And the Jacksonville Animal Care & Protective Services, the third organization in the partnership, made sure kittens were taken directly to the nursery to minimize their stress.

The initial goal of the Jacksonville group was to save 500 kittens, and they exceeded it by 10%. Widespread media coverage resulted in more volunteers including feral cat groups, more financial donors, and "baby shower" fundraising efforts at local big-box stores.

- In 2013, almost 14,000 cats and kittens were killed in Utah shelters, accounting for about 78% of all shelter deaths in the state. Last year in March, the **Best Friends Kitten Nursery** opened in South Salt Lake, UT. Every day since, staff and volunteers have cared for about 100 orphaned kittens at a time, as well as nursing mothers and their babies.

Today, every kitten who comes into South Salt Lake Animal Services, West Valley City Animal Services, West Jordan Animal Services, and Salt Lake County Animal Services is moved to the Best Friends Kitten Nursery.

- In Los Angeles, the **Best Friends Animal Society's No Kill LA** program has created a three-room kitten nursery that cares for up to 100 kittens, from newborns to 7 weeks old. The 24/7 nursery is run by No Kill LA staff and a couple hundred active volunteers.

- Additional shelters with successful kitten nurseries include:
 - 🐾 **North Shore Animal League in Port Washington, NY**
 - 🐾 **Peninsula Humane Society and SPCA in Burlingame, CA**
 - 🐾 **City of Bloomington Animal Services in Indiana**

General Guidelines for Setting Up a Kitten Nursery

For organizations considering opening a kitten nursery, **Target Zero** offers the following recommendations:

- Before launching the program, determine local volunteer interest and recruit volunteers, especially for overnight shifts, to make sure kittens can be cared for 24/7.
- Have a “Baby Shower” for a grand opening, invite media and gain as much public attention and donations as possible.
- Create space that is separate from the shelter animals. Staff and volunteers should ideally be exclusive to the nursery.
- Ensure the space is adequately insulated with the ability to control the temperature to keep the kittens warm.
- Consider a trailer or mobile unit that can be used for other functions when not in kitten season.
- Make sure volunteers have 24-hour access to the nursery.
- Visit other shelters that have successful nurseries to learn how they do things.
- Have protocols in writing. Train, educate, and communicate with the volunteers and staff on a routine basis.
- Move kittens out of the nursery and into foster or adoptive homes as soon as possible to make room for more.
- If kittens go to foster homes, be sure the program provides off-site adoption events to help them place their fosters on their own.

Sources and References

VetStreet, September 25, 2014.

Maddie's Fund

¹ Cattime.com, September 30, 2016
