

Looking for a home

Animal Welfare League helping homeless pets get the care they need

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By [Susan Guynn](#)

The rental moving truck pulled into the parking lot of the Frederick County animal shelter. The driver got out and pulled two cardboard boxes from the packed cargo area and left them. Inside each box was a mama cat and her litter of kittens.

That's how Lola, one of the mother cats, came to the adoption center and offices of the Animal Welfare League of Frederick County. AWLFC volunteers assist in caring for cats and dogs when the shelter reaches capacity.

The other cat and all of the kittens have been adopted. Lola, a stunning tortoiseshell, tri-colored cat, is still in the care of the AWLFC, where she will stay until she's adopted.

"They were sweet cats and kittens," said Mary Hiatt, president of the AWLFC.

The league was founded in 2001 as a nonprofit, all-volunteer no-kill animal rescue group with the mission of ending pet homelessness in Frederick County. Cats and dogs are placed in foster homes, where they are cared for and socialized until adopted.

Typically, the league has 50 to 60 cats in foster care, with that number increasing during spring "kitten season."

"It's a happy time, but it's also sad because there are so many (kittens), and the shelter can only accommodate so many," said Jill Dorrian, a charter member and past president of the AWLFC.

About a dozen dogs are in foster care, up from an average of five, Hiatt said. "It's a little trickier to find foster providers for dogs. They generally require more training and time."

Growing the dog foster care program is one of the league's goals, Hiatt said.

But foster care and adoption, she said, is just a "Band-Aid" for the number of unwanted companion animals and pet overpopulation. "The solution is spaying and neutering."

The AWLFC has programs in place to help pet owners and property owners with feral cats get them spayed or neutered. Fixing Frederick Felines uses the trap-neuter-return method to trap free-roaming felines, take them to vets for spaying/neutering and vaccinations, and release the animal back into the wild.

The league also holds low-cost spay/neuter clinics monthly -- a program Hiatt would like to expand.

Now that the AWLFC has a "storefront" adoption center and office, more clinics is an attainable goal. The league opened in the Eastgate Center on East Patrick Street in Frederick last October.

"It's been a big dream realized," Dorrian said.

A member bequeathed a generous donation to the AWLFC making it possible.

"We haven't had to tap into that yet, but it gave us the comfort to open an office and adoption center," Hiatt said.

Having a central location for meetings, organizing fundraisers and arranging adoptions not only "feels more established," she said, it's attracted more volunteers.

"We have about 25 regular volunteers," she said, who do everything from morning and evening care for the 15 or so resident cats in the adoption center.

Donna Schadel oversees the foster care and adoption program. A past president and member of the AWLFC board, she is also a charter member.

"We try to pull from Frederick County Animal Control as often as we can. They are always overflowing with cats. That's our first loyalty -- to help them," said Schadel, noting the league rarely takes "owner giveups," unless it's an animal that has been relinquished to a vet hospital because the owner is unable to pay for the animal's medical care.

"Once in our program, the cats are vetted and put in a foster home," Schadel said. The league provides food, litter supplies and medical care.

Schadel has a network of about 15 individuals and families who provide foster care.

"There are some who do it only once and then there are others who do it perpetually, like me," she said.

"It takes time because you are responsible for socializing, housebreaking if needed, and transporting the cat to the vet, if needed. You have to commit to keeping the animal until it's adopted, whatever it takes, whether it's 30 days or a year."

The average stay for cats in foster care is eight to 10 months. At the adoption center, the average stay is three to four weeks, Hiatt said.



Photo by Skip Lawrence

Jill Dorrian plays with some of the cats at the Animal Welfare League recently.

ANIMAL WELFARE LEAGUE OF FREDERICK COUNTY

- WHERE: Adoption center and office, 1202 E. Patrick St., Suite 13A, Frederick.

- The office is staffed by volunteers. For hours or to schedule an appointment, call 301-663-5855 or visit the website at www.awlfc.org.

- OPEN HOUSE celebration and adoption event, Sunday, March 21, from 1 to 4 p.m. Refreshments and prizes provided.

The adoption center and office are open most Saturdays and Sundays from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. and providers can bring their foster animals to those events, as well as to satellite adoptions, such as PetSmart and Pet Value stores in Frederick.

"A lot of foster care providers want to meet the prospective adopter because they have an emotional commitment to the animal," Schadel said.

The adoption process begins with meeting the animal, then with an adoption counselor for an interview and education session.

"If we feel it's a good match, we do a home check and check references, in certain situations," Schadel said.

The adoption fee of \$125 for cats and \$250 for dogs partially covers vet expenses, which include testing for feline leukemia, treating for fleas and heartworm, vaccinations, spaying/neutering and microchipping. The organization holds several fundraisers throughout the year to help with costs, too.

Animals available for adoption are listed on Petfinder.com, an online, searchable database of animals that need homes from more than 12,000 animal shelters and adoption organizations around the U.S., Canada and Mexico.

Hiatt also envisions the AWLFC becoming a clearinghouse for information and education for the public on pet adoption and the importance of spaying and neutering pets. Expanding the Fixing Felines program is part of that, as is the Friends Helping Felines program. With the Friends program, strays can be vetted at a discount rate.

"We post the animal on Petfinder or they can come to our events," Schadel said. "Essentially they are fostering it, but without the commitment of our regular foster care providers."

Hiatt would also like to see the AWLFC do more outreach to the business community and hold educational workshops at the adoption center.

"We help animals, but we're helping people help animals," Hiatt said.

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