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# Challenges and Benefits of Cat Fostering: A Focus Group Study With Volunteer Cat Fosterers in Aotearoa New Zealand

Christine Roseveare<sup>a</sup>, Ágnes Szabó<sup>b</sup>, Ann Weatherall<sup>c,d</sup>, Chelsey Gardiner<sup>c</sup>, Charm Phear<sup>c</sup>, and Anne M. Haase<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Health Sciences, Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand; <sup>b</sup>School of Health, Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand; <sup>c</sup>School of Psychology, Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand; <sup>d</sup>School of Psychology, University of Bedfordshire, Luton, UK

## ABSTRACT


Cat fostering programs play a critical role in managing and supporting the health and wellbeing of stray, abandoned, or relinquished cats. Most cat fostering programs can only operate with the help of volunteer cat fosterers. Yet, there is comparatively little research on the experiences of cat fosterers. This study aimed to explore the motivations of volunteer cat fosterers, the challenges they experienced in their fostering practice, and what they perceived as the main benefits of cat fostering. We conducted focus group interviews with cat fosterers in Aotearoa New Zealand to answer our research questions. In total, 13 cat fosterers with a range of fostering experience participated in the focus groups. Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The primary motivations to become cat fosterers included a general love for animals, wanting an alternative to cat ownership, and the desire to help and make a difference, which was underpinned by altruistic values. Cat fostering is an emotionally challenging role that requires significant time commitment and involves substantial responsibility, which makes it a form of high-stakes volunteerism. Despite the challenges, however, cat fosterers experienced social and emotional benefits along with the satisfaction of making a meaningful impact on their fosters' lives. These benefits fulfill the basic psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence. The findings have important implications for shelter organizations and for the recruitment, retention, and training of volunteer fosterers.

## KEYWORDS

Animal shelters; cats; fostering; high-stakes volunteerism; human–animal interaction; self-determination theory

Managing and rehoming stray, relinquished, and abandoned animals is a challenging issue for companion animal welfare worldwide (Carver, 2020), with animal shelters and rescue organizations attempting to find homes for millions of companion animals every year (Gunter et al., 2022). Cats and kittens are the most common animals cared for by Aotearoa

**CONTACT** Christine Roseveare  c.roseveare@massey.ac.nz  School of Health Sciences, Massey University, PO Box 756, Wellington 6140, New Zealand

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New Zealand rescue organizations, with at least 37,000 passing through organizations that care for cats and kittens in a year (Roseveare & Gates, 2024a). The work of cat and kitten rescue organizations includes rehoming companion animals, as well as conducting trap, neuter, and return (TNR) programs, where animals are desexed and then released to the location in which they were originally found (Rand et al., 2019). Of the more than 1.2 million cats included as part of 41% of households across the country (CANZ, 2020), about a third come from animal rescue organizations (Gates et al., 2019). The New Zealand Code of Cat Welfare defines cat populations based on their interactions with humans (Sumner et al., 2022). *Companion cats* live with humans and are dependent on humans for their welfare. *Stray cats* include lost or abandoned companion animals living alone or in colonies, while *feral cats* generally do not live around centers of human habitation or interact with humans (National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee, 2018).

Fostering programs play an important role in rehoming former or potential companion cats by increasing the capacity of rescue organizations to accept animals (Horecka & Neal, 2022; Reese et al., 2022), reducing stress (McDonald et al., 2022) and the risk of euthanasia for animals in the shelter system (Kerr et al., 2018; Patronek & Crowe, 2018), and increasing the likelihood of adoption (Daily, 2021; Reese et al., 2022). Fostering animals in a home environment can reduce exposure to infectious diseases (Möstl et al., 2013; Rehme et al., 2022), allow sick or injured animals time to heal, and provide opportunities for socialization (Campbell et al., 2024; Reese et al., 2022; Vitale et al., 2022).

Alongside research on the benefits of fostering programs for animals, there is growing interest in research into factors relevant to recruiting and retaining fosterers (Daily, 2021; Maddie's Fund, 2017, 2018; McDonald et al., 2022; Reese et al., 2022). Despite this, there is relatively little known about the motivations and experiences of volunteer fosterers who bring vulnerable animals into their homes (Ackerman et al., 2023; Daily, 2021). Previous studies offer useful insight into the emotional aspects of fostering (Barrett & Patlamazoglou, 2018; Daily, 2021; Reese et al., 2022; Roemer, 2004) and the organizational support that fosterers would find valuable (Graham, 2023; Reese et al., 2022). Animal fostering, particularly fostering high-needs animals, can be a challenging and demanding role (Reese et al., 2022). Despite this, many volunteers continue to foster and report that fostering supports their health and wellbeing (Roseveare et al., 2023).

Large numbers of stray and owned cats are admitted to animal shelters annually, with cats at higher risk of being euthanized than dogs (Cotterell et al., 2024; Rand et al., 2018). Fostering programs are an initiative that may improve outcomes for cats in the shelter system (Campbell et al., 2024; Kerr et al., 2018). Human foster parents provide many kittens with their earliest experiences and fosterer interactions influence kitten behavioral development (Graham, 2023). Research with fosterers to date, mainly from North America, has focused on dog fostering, using cross-sectional surveys and describing or correlating quantitative measures. Foster care has been associated with improved odds of live outcomes for both dogs (Patronek & Crowe, 2018) and cats (Kerr et al., 2018), but there is little research specifically on the experience of cat fosterers.

Although recent research from the United States shows that cat fostering programs in animal rescue are "rare" (Vitale et al., 2022), in Aotearoa New Zealand, the setting of the present study, a recent survey of rescue organizations found that 80% of the organizations that cared for cats or kittens operated feline foster programs (Roseveare & Gates, 2024b).

The present study builds on the studies cited above, exploring the experiences of volunteer cat fosterers from Aotearoa New Zealand, using focus groups to gain a richer understanding of the fosterer experience than is possible through online questionnaires. Our research questions were to explore (1) what motivated people to become cat fosterers, (2) the challenges they experienced in their fostering practice, and (3) what they perceived as the main benefits of volunteer cat fostering. In Aotearoa New Zealand, cat fostering programs can only operate sustainably with the help of community volunteer cat fosterers; therefore, a better understanding of what motivates people to foster and why they continue can provide important information for rescue organizations and contribute to the longevity and success of fostering programs.

## Methods

### *Ethics Statement*

Human ethics approval for this study was obtained from the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee (0000029196).

### *Procedure and Participants*

Two focus group discussions were organized with volunteer cat fosterers from an animal rescue organization that received the invitation to take part in the study via its fosterer mailing list. The focus group discussions took place at the local office of the organization and were co-facilitated by two of the authors (CR and AS). The discussion followed a semi-structured interview guide (questions are shown in online Appendix 1). For their contribution, participants were offered a choice of a supermarket voucher or donation to the organization (\$20 NZD). The donation was made in a lump sum upon completion of data collection. Altogether, 13 fosterers participated in two semi-structured focus group discussions. One of the focus groups took place over the weekend and the other on a weekday in the evening. Participants were allocated into the two groups based on their availability and experience to ensure a relatively even mix of fostering experience levels. More information about the groups and participants can be found in [Table 1](#).

### *Data Analysis*

Focus group discussions were audio- and video-recorded and transcribed verbatim by two of the authors (CG, CP). Data were analyzed using conventional qualitative content

**Table 1.** Focus group characteristics.

	Focus group 1	Focus group 2
Duration	77 min	71 min
Number of participants	6	7
Level of participant experience	Novice to 10+ years	2 to 10+ years
Gender composition	Women only	Mixed
Number of facilitators	2	2
Number of research assistants	1	1

analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This approach was chosen as the aim of the research was to describe the shared understandings of cat fosterers regarding the motivations for, and challenges and benefits of, looking after cats. The coding process was inductive: codes were developed from the data as opposed to using a pre-defined category list (Mayring, 2000). The authors read and re-read the transcripts to gain familiarity with the content. During the initial coding phase, three authors (AS, CG, CR) coded the text independently according to the research questions. Excerpts were highlighted that described motivations for, and challenges and perceived benefits of, fostering. This was followed by a collaborative phase when the authors compared their coding and workshopped ideas regarding higher-order codes. Some codes were combined, some were split into multiple codes, and others were recoded or removed during this step. In the final phase, one of the authors (CG) collated the codes and organized them into higher-order codes. These were again discussed collaboratively with the research team to create the final list of higher- and lower-order codes. Final higher- and lower-order codes are reported in [Table 2](#).

## Results

Results of the content analysis are presented according to research questions. First, we discuss findings regarding the motivations of cat fosterers. Next, we canvass the perceived challenges of fostering, followed by an overview of the perceived benefits of fostering.

### ***What Motivates People to Become Cat Fosterers?***

A common motivation for fostering was feeling a deep connection to animals (or cats specifically): “just a basic love of animals.” Many fosterers reported growing up with animals and having been cat owners themselves in the past, but their current situation did not allow them to own a cat. For example, for one participant, moving from the countryside to the city and the resulting change in their lifestyle meant they could no longer commit to cat ownership:

I was motivated to do it because when we moved back to (city name) three or four years ago, we had two cats, and we’d lived in the country. And we couldn’t bring country cats to an apartment in the city.

Similarly, a few participants took up fostering after moving out of home as a way to stay connected with animals: “I grew up with animals and when I came to university, I couldn’t have any of my animals around me.” Fostering can be fit around travel, study, and work commitments, and is a useful alternative when one’s living situation does not allow a permanent pet or for those who are not ready for the long-term commitment required for cat ownership: “I started fostering about a year after my cat died because I decided I didn’t want another permanent animal. This was a way to sort of have short-term joy without the long-term commitment.” Thus, coupled with the love for animals, fosterers were motivated to find an alternative to cat ownership.

**Table 2.** A summary of higher- and lower-order codes according to research questions.

Research question	Higher-order codes	Lower-order codes
Motivations to foster	Connection to animals	Love of animals Personal history with animals Loss of own cat
	Seeking alternative to cat ownership	Barriers to being a cat owner: study/work; upcoming travel; not having the space/own home; not ready for the long-term commitment
	Altruism/wanting to help	Helping in crises (e.g., COVID-19 lockdowns) Having a desire and ability/skill to help
	Being recruited for the role	Asked to foster by the organization/through another role in the organization Encouraged to foster by family/friends
Perceived challenges of fostering	Emotional challenges	Difficult emotions: frustration; disappointment; guilt; self-blame; worry Relinquishment Loss/death of the foster animal
	Cats with complex needs	Large litters Timid and feral cats Administering medication Bottle feeding Existing illnesses Unknown/latent illnesses
	Fitting fostering into one's life	Space-related challenges: no spare room; being a renter Time commitment Balancing work and fostering Balancing fostering with caring for own pets Negotiating with housemates and other family Following protocols
	Influence and involvement	Medical care and decisions Adoption process Balancing protocol with animal needs Uncertainty around outcomes
Perceived benefits of fostering	Social wellbeing	Positive human–animal relationship Companionship/counteracting loneliness Relationships with other fosterers and members of the care team
	Mental health	Positive emotions: joy and enjoyment; pride; love Fulfilling and rewarding
	Practical benefits	Having a cat without having a cat Learning and acquiring new skills

Fosterers also spoke of their desire to contribute positively to the community, especially in times of crises. For example, one participant started fostering when the first COVID-19 lockdown was announced in Aotearoa New Zealand and the animal rescue organization had to find fosterers at short notice:

We had three days to get all these animals out to foster. There was this one big, old, black and white cat, and he was going to be in this box for seven weeks. And I was like “Yeah, I’ll take him.”

In addition to wanting to help, some fosterers commented that they knew they had the ability and skills to become fosterers. One participant, in particular, talked about their professional background, which prepared them to foster: “I started doing it because I used to be a vet technician. I figured it was a good way to contribute to the health and wellbeing of cats at the same time as having the space to do so.” Seeing themselves as capable to take on this role and do it well was an important facilitating factor for some fosterers.

Finally, a common pathway into fostering was through recruitment. Some fosterers had other roles at the organization and eventually started fostering as they became familiar with the process:

I got into it really because I was asked. I started volunteering in the feline and small animals' area (...) and I was asked to be a fosterer.

Others were recruited by family and friends who were either fosterers themselves or thought this would be a good role for the person.

### ***What Are the Challenges of Being a Cat Fosterer?***

There was consensus among participants that fostering was an emotionally demanding role. They reported that moments of frustration were common in the day-to-day care of animals:

The bottle feeding can be frustrating to start with, because some of them won't engage and all of those sorts of things. Then when you finally get it, and then you start to transition them into solids, lots of frustrations during that period.

Fosterers often experience distress when the cats are unwell and worry about whether they will find a good home. For example, one participant talked about the devastation they felt when they found out that their foster had a serious illness: "I've had panleuk [Feline panleukopenia] that have come in, and they found out later. I've been completely devastated because they do tell you that the likelihood of you losing them is high." Fosterers develop a strong attachment to the cats in their care, and consequently relinquishment can be emotionally challenging, as articulated by one of the participants: "You do form really strong connections that is really hard to break when they're ready to go. So that was probably something that I didn't quite anticipate." Difficulties with relinquishment can lead to extended fostering, even progress to self-adoption of the animal: "Because they were my first lot, I couldn't let them go." The death of a foster animal was highlighted as something that can be particularly difficult emotionally: "When you lose them, and you do lose them. I've lost quite a few. I find that harder than giving them up to be honest."

Although experiencing some difficult emotions after losing an animal was expected, fosterers were not necessarily prepared for the emotional impact or had the tools at first to cope with these experiences. Having support from staff at the animal rescue organization or from other fosterers was mentioned as an important factor that enabled coping with loss, as demonstrated by this participant's example of a foster cat who had to be euthanized:

In the end it was decided that the best choice was to have her put down. (...) The vet called me and he's like, "Are you okay?" And I was like "I guess but it's upsetting." (...) I was like "You're the one that actually has to, you know, put her down. And you also went through this process of figuring out all these different medications." (...) It's just nice to have that reciprocal sort of thing.

This fosterer found it particularly helpful to share the experience with the veterinarian, who was a source of informal support. Importantly, she identified that the veterinarian and her were in the same situation; they were both experiencing the loss of the

animal. The fosterers are part of a system of care, and it is important to recognize that all members of the team are impacted.

Another major area of challenge mentioned was caring for cats with complex needs. These may include cats with diseases or conditions that require adherence to additional protocol, such as ringworm, or looking after timid cats who need additional socialization. A topic commonly discussed was caring for cats with an unknown or latent illness: “When they’re sick with things that haven’t been indicated in advance. So, you find out after you’ve had them for a day or two that something major is wrong.” These fosters start out as relatively easy but can quickly turn into a complex case that the fosterer may not have been prepared for, either in terms of their current skill level or the time commitment it required: “Then trying to figure out how to deal with that and schedule that. Because you know, everyone has their own lives and fostering kind of has to go around that as well.”

Fosterers reflected on the value of training and formal organizational support in managing these situations. There was some formal support already in place, such as a fosterer manual and a buddy system, but some fosterers believed there was need for more training for new fosterers and on-going upskilling opportunities for more experienced fosterers: “Formal training would be good for the average person.”

A related challenge mentioned was fitting fostering into one’s day-to-day life. There may be difficulties around the layout of one’s home when fosters must be kept in a confined area. There are additional cleaning considerations when the fosters are sick or need special care, and these need to be balanced against the needs of one’s own animals. One participant talked about overcoming this by creating a designated room for their foster animals in the house:

We’ve got a separate bedroom (...) it is purely a cat room. It’s been painted with stuff on the walls to keep it clean, and it’s got lino on the floor. No soft furnishing at all. (...) It’s got a gate on it. The kittens can come in, but the dogs can’t go in.

Fitting fostering around employment was also discussed extensively. There was a shared acknowledgment that fostering required good time management, scheduling around work, and creative solutions. This is illustrated by the quote below from a fosterer who was unable to attend veterinarian appointments on the day designated for fosterers because of their work:

It’s quite a drive, and I can’t bring my foster cats and kittens back on the Friday foster day, because I’m working, or in the evenings. It’s too hard. I’ve actually managed to navigate through the volunteer system to organize an appointment that sort of suits me.

Additionally, fosterers talked about how fostering impacted not only them but other people in their lives. They have to ensure housemates or other family members follow fostering protocols: “I live with flatmates and that’s a challenge for me because they don’t always understand the importance of keeping the animal in a particular room or inside the house.” It can also create tension in the household to negotiate how often one accepts new fosters: “My boyfriend, he can be a bit ... Like he ends up loving them. But he’s always like, ‘Oh, can we have a break? Can we just wait a couple of weeks?’”

A large proportion of the discussion focused on issues around influence on organizational processes. Fosterers consensually expressed a desire to have the freedom to choose their level of involvement in decisions that directly impact the animals in their care. This is illustrated by this exchange between two fosterers about euthanasia.

Fosterer A: I was in tears. It was like, "Why are you telling me? I wish you hadn't told me. Why did you ring and tell me?" Because I would just rather have believed that he found a safe home. So that was really hard. If you have to put a cat down, then please don't tell me.

Fosterer B: See, I'm the opposite. I prefer to know. I'd probably prefer to know.

Some fosterers wanted to know that their foster was euthanized as it gave them closure. Others preferred not to know. Similarly, some fosterers found it challenging if they could not be part of the adoption process. Others did not want to be directly involved in the decision-making but would have liked to know the outcome. Fosterers, however, agreed that they wanted to have the opportunity to decide for themselves their level of involvement.

Finally, there was substantial discussion around the challenges to adhere to organizational protocols and the extent to which fosterers felt they could provide input into these processes. While they acknowledged that protocols were there to protect both fosterers and animals, these were not always realistic to follow day-to-day: "I know the instructions are to wear PPE, but when you're rushing to go to work there's no time!" And they had to be balanced against the needs of the animal: "I think 'What's best for the cat?' What's best for the cat is me not wearing PPE and me giving them litter that, if they're going to eat it, it's not going to do them any harm."

Additionally, participants commented on the role of the organization in creating an environment where fosterers felt empowered to provide input. For example, one fosterer explained how having a good rapport with the veterinary team enabled her to communicate concerns about their foster's care:

The cat was very, very anxious, very overweight, seen as like morbidly obese, and I didn't feel it was wise to have dental so quickly, and the vet care team agrees. So, I was just able to, sort of, communicate.

The veterinary team's openness to her feedback and willingness to postpone the procedure made the fosterer feel more in control and supported throughout the process. While participants shared many positive stories of working collaboratively with staff, there were also examples of failed communication, difficulty accessing information, and lack of responsiveness from the organization. These complaints generally boiled down to challenges with processes and communication, as one of the participants summarized it:

I think most of what we've highlighted throughout the whole interview is actually communication or process issues that need improvement. So, process around what happens after you return the animal or what do you do for communication, the easiest way to get a response if it's like a medical problem, making appointments and stuff like paperwork. But then the communication itself is more around being more clear and having it more open and easier to access.

## ***What Are the Perceived Benefits of Cat Fostering?***

Fosterers talked about deriving a wide range of personal benefits from fostering. These could be categorized into three main domains: social wellbeing, emotional wellbeing, and practical benefits. With respect to social wellbeing, many fosterers highlighted the impact of developing a positive bond with the animals. The companionship provided by the fosters helped them combat loneliness; for example, during lockdown or after the loss of a partner. The exchange below highlights the impact fostering had on social wellbeing during lockdown:

Fosterer C: I had fosters both this most recent lockdown and the one last year. My lockdowns were relatively easy, but I don't think that they would have been, if I didn't have a pet because they're such a companion and such a presence that doesn't allow you to feel lonely. Or if you're sad, they're very comforting to have around. So that's been a massive benefit for me in my life, particularly since COVID.

Fosterer D: What you're saying about with the lockdown, I had one last time. And this time I didn't have any and I live alone, and it was a really different lockdown experience. This time I was like "Why am I so bored? What did I do last time?"

Fostering, however, is more than just an activity that keeps people occupied and provides companionship. Many fosterers talked about fostering elevating their overall quality of life: "If I don't have an animal around me, my life doesn't feel complete." Additionally, being a fosterer meant being part of a community and having an opportunity to create new relationships with other fosterers or members of the organization. For example, one fosterer talked about the benefit of starting a group with other fosterers caring for timid cats: "We formed a little timid group. (...) Once you could actually talk to other people about techniques that they used, it was amazing."

With respect to benefits for emotional wellbeing, the fosterers talked extensively about the positive emotions they experienced while looking after their fosters. These included feelings of love, joy, pride, and fascination. For example, when describing the mental health impact of fostering, one participant said:

I've found it really good for my mental health to have a companion around that you otherwise wouldn't have. Knowing that there's this animal that you're looking after, and you have this unconditional love for them.

Fosterers unanimously found the role to be fulfilling and rewarding. Making a difference by seeing the fosters develop into healthy, well-rounded cats under their care was commonly discussed as one of the most rewarding aspects of fostering: "The main thing I love about it is getting scruffy third litter babies round about March (...) and seeing them bloom and by the time that they are adopted, they're just beautiful."

In addition to the positive effects on social and emotional wellbeing, fostering offers practical benefits as well. Fosterers often commented on how fostering allowed them to have a cat without having a cat permanently. For example, one participant explained that they were at a particular life stage, when they could not commit to owning an animal, but having foster cats allowed them to derive the same benefits as pet owners, but without the financial costs and long-term commitment: "I knew that I don't really know what I'm going to be doing for the next 15 to 20 years, so couldn't actually take on my

own cat. It's like having a cat without having a cat." Fostering also provides an opportunity to continue learning about cats and acquire new skills: "And you're learning all the time, even after ten years. I've got some disease I haven't heard of, I haven't dealt with before. I get a lot of benefits out of it."

## Discussion

The focus group discussions highlighted the fosterers' primary motivations and deep understanding of the importance and complexity of looking after foster animals. Although there was a shared recognition that fostering can be a challenging and demanding role, fosterers were able to articulate a range of practical, social, and emotional benefits of fostering.

### *The Challenges of High-Stakes Volunteerism*

High-stakes volunteerism describes work requiring both significant time and energy, and with responsibility for the medical or physiological needs of others. The energy and time cost of high-stakes volunteering may pose challenges not only for volunteers' wellbeing but also for recruitment and retention (McNamee & Peterson, 2016). Gunter et al. (2022) have recently argued that the responsibility, supervision, and care required to support the life and health of the animals, along with the strong emotional relationships fosterers may develop with their animals, makes fostering a form of high stakes volunteerism. Despite this, many high-stakes volunteers, including animal fosterers, remain highly committed (Reese et al., 2022; Roseveare et al., 2023).

The findings of our focus group interviews support Gunter et al.'s (2022) notion that animal fostering is a form of high-stakes volunteerism. Participants commonly reflected on being unprepared for the strong and difficult emotions induced by fostering, including relinquishment and death. The significance of grief associated with end-of-life decisions and its management is recognized in research on both veterinarians and owners (Littlewood et al., 2020). The limited research available on the nature of grief for foster cats who die suggests that this may also be a significant issue for fosterers (Barrett & Patlamazoglou, 2018), one important to explore in future research (Roseveare et al., 2023). Although relinquishment was challenging, fosterers found fulfillment in helping animals and experienced positive emotions when witnessing the development and adoption of their fosters, which aligns with findings from previous research on dog fosterers (Daily, 2021; Roemer, 2004).

Dealing with relinquishment, death and grief, and other challenging situations requires significant emotional labor from fosterers; that is, mental work is required to manage difficult situations and interactions (Hochschild, 1983). While emotional labor has not explicitly been studied in relation to cat fosterers, research shows the significant emotional stress involved in dog fostering (Reese et al., 2022). Emotional labor can lead to compassion fatigue, which is another risk for animal fosterers (Daily, 2021; Roemer, 2004) as it is for other animal rescue volunteers (Jacobs & Reese, 2021; Monaghan et al., 2020). We did not identify compassion fatigue as a significant issue in our study, possibly because participants were all current fosterers. Additional demands on fosterers

include coping with uncertainty, caring for cats with complex needs, and navigating organizational processes. Yet they were committed to invest a large amount of time into fostering, and most fosterers in our study had fulfilled this role consistently and with a long-term focus.

Given that fostering involves the responsibility for another life, what foster carers do and how they do it matters (Graham, 2023). While animal fosterers may often already bring a great deal of expertise to their work (Roemer, 2004), training for fosterers is also important to ensure both support for them and good health outcomes for animals in their care (Berliner et al., 2022; Campbell et al., 2024; Graham et al., 2023; Reese et al., 2022).

### ***Fostering Can Fulfill Fundamental Psychological Needs***

Despite the high stakes at play and the challenges associated with cat fostering, participants agreed that the benefits offered by the role outweighed the costs. Specifically, three basic psychological needs were made prominent as participants reflected on their fostering experiences: competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020) describes competence, relatedness, and autonomy as foundational to intrinsic motivation and wellbeing.

Competence is a desire to engage in activities adroitly and to have a meaningful effect on one's environment. Self-perception of competence or being perceived by others as capable and fit for the role was a key motivating factor for some to start fostering. Further, fosterers highlighted how they believed their care enabled their fosters to develop into healthy and well-rounded cats ready for adoption. As such, they were able to make a meaningful impact on their fosters' lives. To satisfy the need for competence, people must have opportunities for learning and developing mastery. Indeed, continuous learning/gaining new knowledge was one of the main benefits of fostering mentioned. Previous literature has discussed the requirement of special skills, training, and competency as a potential barrier to fostering (Maddie's Fund, 2017, 2018; McDonald et al., 2022); however, our findings highlight the role of perceived self-competence in both recruiting and retaining fosterers.

Alongside a desire to be effective and act competently, relatedness or being connected to others is a fundamental psychological need (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Most fosterers sought out fostering opportunities to fulfill their desire for contact with animals and to make a positive contribution to the community. Having a sense of affinity and empathy toward animals has been previously identified as a core value among animal shelter volunteers (Ackerman et al., 2023; Daily, 2021; Neumann, 2010). When discussing the perceived benefits of fostering, social and emotional wellbeing were two main domains where fosterers experienced positive effects. The companionship and positive human–animal relationship fosterers develop were perceived to combat loneliness, improve mood, and promote a better quality of life.

Being connected to foster animals, contributing to a sense of purpose, other people, and organizational support are predictors of continued fostering (Daily, 2021; DeWitt, 2020; Reese et al., 2022; Roemer, 2004; Roseveare et al., 2023). Through fostering, participants were able to create new relationships within the fostering community. A sense of belonging to a community of fosterers was positively and widely valued by participants.

Underpinning a positive sense of community was having good support from the organization.

The third psychological need, autonomy, refers to a desire for agency, free will, and power to make choices (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Although participants agreed that fostering provided opportunities to exercise their control and autonomy, this sense of agency was not equally distributed across contexts. In their own homes, fosterers have the freedom to make decisions about the day-to-day care of their fosters and to carefully adjust protocols to fit their own needs and the needs of the animals in their care. Fosterers, however, collectively shared a desire to have more agency over their level of involvement in organizational processes, such as choosing the adoption home and being advised about adoption outcomes or being able to provide input regarding medical issues.

Schabram and Maitlis (2017) argue that individuals who have a voice in organizational decision-making are both more satisfied with their work and better able to cope with challenges. Based on research with animal rescue organization volunteers in the US, Reese et al. (2022) argue that having a voice is a strong predictor of satisfaction. Therefore, allowing volunteers to provide input into the decision- and policy-making processes of organizations can increase volunteer satisfaction and retention. Our research adds to the broad categories of “input” discussed by Reese et al. (2021), such as the ability to contribute to organizational direction and policy or to make suggestions, by identifying specific decisions fosterers would like the choice to be involved in or not.

### ***Practical Implications for Shelter Organizations***

Recognizing the importance of fulfilling psychological needs in the experience of cat fosterers has numerous implications for recruitment, fosterer training, and organizational practices. According to self-determination theory, when the innate psychological needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy are satisfied, people experience greater wellbeing, function better in their roles, and are more likely to persist in their behaviors (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the context of volunteering, feeling effective, having a sense of belonging and agency, and being afforded more control over decision-making increase volunteer engagement and organizational commitment (Fernandes & Matos, 2023). Providing fosterers more agency and involving them in decision-making processes (where appropriate) can support their sense of autonomy, contributing to fosterer retention.

Highlighting the availability of training and support is a recommended recruitment strategy for potential fosterers (Maddie’s Fund, 2017). Alongside this, acknowledging the skill sets some prospective fosterers bring and highlighting those they will develop can help reinforce their sense of competence and thus lead to better recruitment outcomes. If people see themselves as being effective and making a meaningful contribution as fosterers, they will be more likely to engage and commit to the role long-term.

Fosterers identified both formal (e.g., training) and informal (e.g., sharing experiences with staff and other volunteers) support as critical in coping with the emotional and practical challenges of the role. Volunteer fosterers are part of a system of care. When they feel integrated into the wider foster care team and have supportive and reciprocal relationships with other members of the team, they are better able to navigate stressful

experiences. Recruiting fosterers who have an established tie to the organization, or whose family or friends foster, may be a particularly useful recruitment strategy for high-stakes volunteering, such as fostering. This recruiting strategy may then make it more likely that the expectations and realities of the fosterers' role are aligned (McNamee & Peterson, 2016). Similarly, creating opportunities for fosterers to connect with each other (e.g., through mentoring programs, networking events, and special interest groups) to share knowledge and provide informal support can promote positive fostering experiences and satisfy the need for both relatedness and competence. Many participants expressed that coming to the focus group discussion itself was a learning opportunity and helped them meet other fosterers.

One of the main sources of difficulty for fosterers was dealing with the unknown or the unforeseen. While there was an acknowledgment that there would always be a level of uncertainty involved in fostering cats, improved screening for illnesses, on-going training, and organizational support could help to reduce some of this uncertainty and its negative impact on fosterers. Fosterers need opportunities to extend their competence by further developing their practice, which would allow them to become better prepared for managing unforeseen events and to experience them as less disruptive to their sense of autonomy. Finally, the discussions regarding opportunities for involvement in organizational processes that directly impact fosterers and their fosters spoke to the importance of affording people choices and agency and thus supporting their sense of autonomy. Of particular importance is how agency is distributed across contexts. Fosterers may spend a considerable amount of time with the foster animals, and as such are experts in aspects of their fosters' personality, development, preferences, and behavior. If they are given agency and control not only in the home but also outside the home in decisions affecting the fosters, they can make significant contributions to the welfare of the animals.

### ***Limitations and Strengths***

We only talked to current fosterers and there was likely self-selection into participating, such that committed fosterers with a more positive fostering experience may have been more likely to participate in the study. Future research should consider interviewing those who stopped fostering to better understand why people continue or cease to foster cats. In addition, recruitment occurred through the animal rescue organization and the discussions, while confidential, took place in one of the meeting rooms of the organization. It is possible that participants did not share freely some of their challenges or concerns, especially related to organizational practices.

Our analytic strategy aimed at representing the "collective voice" of participants as opposed to exploring points of contradiction, conflict, or divergence. Focus groups allow participants to develop opinions collectively and come to a consensus about the most relevant and important issues related to the topic of the conversation. It is, however, important to acknowledge that opinions perceived as socially desirable are more likely to be voiced in a group setting.

Finally, it is important to note that focus groups can only provide insights into fosterers' self-perceptions of competence. Although many of the fosterers in the groups had years of fostering experience and some had formal training in veterinary care, fosterers may

have over- or underestimated their competency level. For example, recent research by Graham (2023) on Canadian kitten fosterers found some fosterers describing “non recommended” techniques for socializing fearful kittens. Nevertheless, our findings show that feeling competent, whether it is an accurate self-assessment or not, plays a key role in both starting and continuing cat fostering.

## Conclusions

This study sheds light on the motivations and experiences of those engaging in the important and challenging role of looking after foster animals and the psychological needs fostering may fulfill. Animal fostering is a form of high-stakes volunteerism that carries inherent emotional and physical risks for volunteers. Organizations need to look after the health and safety of these volunteers to ensure they can provide care that is sustainable. Our findings also highlight the skills and competence fosterers may bring and develop as their fostering experience grows. These findings may help organizations recruit and retain the volunteers essential to the longevity and success of cat fostering programs and improve the lives of the animals they serve.

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