

Saving Kittens in Partnership

A guide for helping kittens
with critical care needs



THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES



newborn kitten rescue



CONTENTS

CONTENTS	1
INTRODUCTION	2
Acknowledgements.....	2
About Newborn Kitten Rescue.....	2
THE SKIP MODEL.....	4
STEP 1: HOW TO BEGIN.....	6
STEP 2: YOU'RE READY TO GROW	16
DEFINING SUCCESS.....	20
RESOURCES	21

Introduction

This guide is brought to you through a collaboration between the Newborn Kitten Rescue, The National Kitten Coalition and the Humane Society of the United States thanks to a generous supporter.

Too many high-needs kittens are dying or are humanely euthanized by local animal shelters that don't yet have the resources to care for this highly vulnerable population. These may be kittens who need immediate care for injuries, upper respiratory or eye infections, ringworm, neurological issues, or they may simply be underweight newborns in need of warmth and a bottle of milk replacement around the clock.

But by working closely in partnership with a rescue that is focused on critical care kittens, many of these precious lives *can* be saved. Whether you work for a large, government-funded animal shelter or a small, foster-based rescue organization, this guide will help you work collaboratively to save more neonatal kittens and may even inspire you to successfully start an organization with a sole focus on helping kittens reach adoption age.

ABOUT NEWBORN KITTEN RESCUE (NKR)

Newborn Kitten Rescue began in 2018 as a very small, all-volunteer rescue with just a handful of board members and experienced fosters who were united in a passion for saving at-risk kittens who would otherwise be euthanized. While there were a handful of small, independent rescues in metropolitan Phoenix that worked specifically with orphaned neonatal kittens, none specialized exclusively in caring for sick, injured or underweight neonates or other older kittens who would otherwise be euthanized.

Our first board meeting was a roundtable discussion with our founder that focused on the processes, people, partners and resources we would need to get started to take in kittens who were at a very high risk for euthanasia at shelters. Our shoestring budget, which was initially funded by friends and family, addressed only the most basic of our needs: veterinary care and foster supplies.

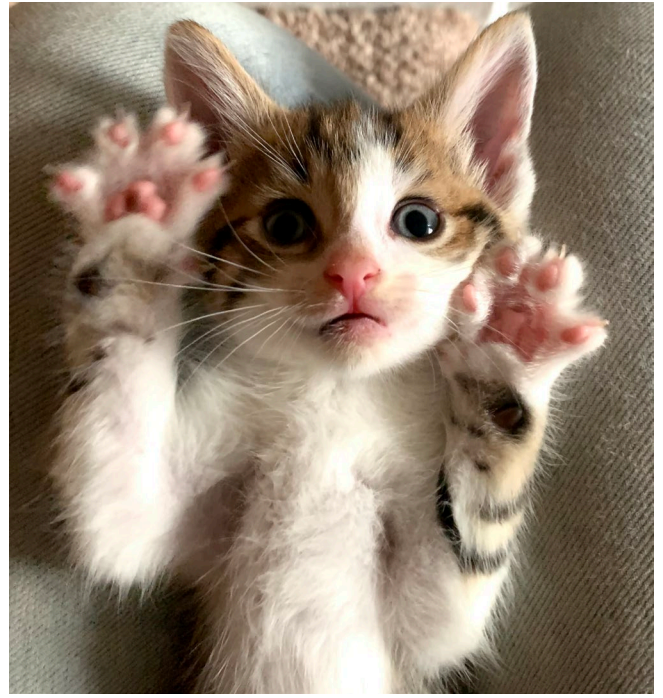
Once we had a common understanding of how we would work, we began to look for a local shelter with which to partner. Initially, we worked solely with the Arizona Humane Society (AHS), and we continue to develop this important relationship today. AHS was an ideal partner because it already operated a 24/7 Bottle Baby Intensive Care Unit and had veterinary staff who were experienced caring for neonatal kittens. AHS also operates the largest shelter-based animal trauma hospital in Arizona, where hundreds of orphaned kittens are dropped off by good Samaritans each year.



When a kitten surrendered to AHS does not meet its intake criteria for the intensive care unit because they are sick, underweight or injured, the shelter's first call is to us. We retrieve kittens within a two-hour window and bring them into our critical care nursery. There, the kittens are assessed and stabilized before being transferred to one of our foster volunteers. We assume all costs associated with a kitten's care, including vaccinations, diagnostic tests, veterinary care, medications and physical therapy—everything necessary to restore that kitten to full health. We also cover extraordinary medical costs when a kitten needs a higher level of care in a clinic or hospital. We do not give up on a kitten solely due to the cost of their care. This is why it's crucial to maintain limits on the number of kittens your organization can take in.

NKR does not accept kitten intakes from the public and, unlike other private rescues, we do not adopt out the kittens we care for. This allows us to focus 100% on what we do best: restoring kittens to health. Our critical care nursery is not open to the public, and all of our foster volunteers and board members work out of their homes.

After a very successful first year in which we saved 140 kittens, we formed partnerships with three additional shelters in Arizona as our capacity allowed. Since our first season in 2019, Newborn Kitten Rescue has worked with five partners and saved over 600 kittens from euthanasia. And as we prepare for future seasons, we continue to assess and refine our business model with a goal of a sustainable future that will allow us to save at-risk kittens for years to come.



Saving Kittens in Partnership: The “SKIP” Model

The Newborn Kitten Rescue (NKR), an Arizona rescue, developed the Saving Kittens in Partnership (SKIP) model to support “last chance” kittens when local shelters are unable or not resourced to care for. These are kittens who are at high risk of euthanasia because they have critical health care needs that make them ineligible for rehabilitation and adoption by shelters. They include neonatal kittens (“bottle babies” with other health problems that cannot be adequately addressed by shelter staff or foster caregivers trained to bottle feed); weaned kittens with health issues; or older high-needs kittens who may not meet the shelter’s intake requirements (such as kittens suspected to have ringworm). While many shelters have foster programs, not all caregivers are in a position or have the unique skills to care for these very fragile kittens. But through the SKIP model, these kittens can be saved.

The SKIP model has four components, described briefly here in addition to in-depth details throughout this guide.

First, a group of individuals, organized as a nonprofit rescue, partners with a local shelter that has difficulty saving high-needs kittens. The rescue group agrees to quickly receive these kittens and transport them from the shelter for care off-site by the rescue’s volunteers. To ensure capacity to care, the rescue does not take in kittens from the public, only from the shelter, and instead routes members of the public to the local shelter directly. By working solely with shelters, a rescue will be able to manage the organization’s capacity and minimize situations where kittens are declined.

Second, the rescue operates at least one “critical care nursery”. This may be the home of one of the rescue’s primary volunteers or founders with the expertise—and space—to care for kittens in need of critical and emergency care. In the critical care nursery, the kittens receive 24/7 care from a dedicated individual (or team of volunteers) who are trained to care for them.

Third, once the kittens are stabilized, they are transferred to trained foster caregivers according to each caregiver’s experience with the kittens’ developmental or veterinary needs. Because NKR focuses on saving kittens in need of critical care, its foster caregivers are especially skilled in caring for sick, injured and underweight kittens and receive consistent support from the rescue. They are trained in NKR’s protocols for intake, sanitation, enrichment, and medical issues. The rescue provides foster caregivers with all of the equipment and daily supplies they need to care for the kittens, delivered to their homes either by mail or by a transportation volunteer. For some, this will include an incubator, nebulizers or oxygenators. (See the recommended supply list at the end of this guide.) In addition, the SKIP model contracts with veterinary technicians to do occasional house calls to perform health assessments and administer vaccines and other medications.

Finally, when ready for adoption, healthy kittens are returned to the partner shelter for spay/neuter surgery, microchipping and adoption into loving homes. In this model the rescue group does not facilitate adoptions directly to the public. Rather, the group focuses its limited resources solely on its area of expertise—caring for high-needs kittens.

The SKIP model enables your rescue and your partner shelter to focus your resources on what you each do best:

- The shelter has the infrastructure and resources, including kitten foster caregivers, to intake and care for generally healthy kittens, perform spay/neuter surgeries, vaccinate kittens and place them into loving, adoptive homes.
- Your rescue and foster caregivers focus all of their attention, resources and energy on stabilizing the kittens the shelter cannot care for by feeding them, treating them for illness or injury and improving their health using veterinarian-approved procedures and protocols.



While shelters do more than take in animals and adopt them out, for the purposes of this guide, a **shelter** is defined as a government or private nonprofit organization with paid staff that takes in animals from the public, houses them on site or in foster homes, and cares for them until shelter staff can find adoptive homes.

A **rescue** in this toolkit is defined as a foster-based nonprofit staffed primarily by volunteers who prepare animals for adoption in their homes.

A **foster caregiver** is an individual who cares for a small number of animals in their home until the animals are ready for adoption.

Step 1: How to Begin

DETERMINING YOUR FOCUS

This guide provides the basic steps for starting a kitten-focused rescue that works collaboratively with shelters to save kittens who would otherwise be euthanized upon intake or soon thereafter. It provides information to shelters wishing to save these kittens about what to expect from a partner in the effort, but the bulk of this guide is geared toward individuals interested in establishing or refocusing a rescue that will work with a partner shelter to save kittens.

Much of what you will want to do or need to do will be unique to the needs of the shelter partner, the number of trained foster caregivers you can initially recruit, and even your location. “Kitten season” can vary in different locations, from a couple of months in cooler climates to six to eight months in warmer climates. Until you have sorted out the unique needs of your community, we recommend you start small and establish basic, achievable goals for the first year of operations.

It is imperative that time be spent meeting with your local shelter to learn about what challenges they face so you can build a program to address those niche areas with which the shelter is struggling. Maybe they have a large volume of foster homes but lack the bandwidth to train a portion of them in complex, medical care for neonates. Maybe they don’t have the medical budget or equipment to support young kittens with health challenges. Learning how you can fill the gap should be a primary driver to your mission’s focus.

The aim for the first year should be to fine tune your focus and create a track record of success that enables you to grow in subsequent years. This includes establishing a sound foundation for operating and funding the rescue while cultivating a small and manageable group of trained foster caregivers to support you. Only then will you be in a position to grow.



BEFORE YOU TAKE IN A SINGLE KITTEN... GET ORGANIZED!

There is much to do before your rescue takes in the first kitten.

- Write a **mission statement** that affirms your rescue’s desire to partner with shelters to save high-needs kittens that shelters are unable, or not resourced, to care for. Set some modest goals/objectives for what you can realistically achieve in the first few years.

Your organization’s mission will be a function of the needs of your partner shelter(s). This mission will likely define the types of kittens who will be your initial focus and the foster caregivers you will need to recruit to the effort.

Examples of target populations may include neonatal kittens under the age of 4 weeks with health issues; kittens of any age with treatable illnesses; or kittens with injuries. The first step will be to identify a local shelter you want to partner with. Find out which kittens it needs help with the most. Convey your interest in rescuing sick, injured or underweight kittens, kittens who don’t qualify for the shelter’s regular rescue lists and would otherwise be at risk for euthanasia. Some shelters, for example, will only accept healthy, uninjured orphaned kittens who weigh at least 90 grams.

When approached from a place of partnership and not criticism, most organizations will be grateful to find a partner that accepts the most vulnerable kittens; such an

arrangement will increase their lifesaving and spare their employees the difficult task of euthanizing a kitten.

Be careful not to jump into the deep end without first learning how to swim. Set modest goals and objectives for the first few seasons and use this time to make sure you have the right processes, procedures and team in place to properly care for the kittens. Work with the partner shelter and your team to continually evaluate whether everything is unfolding as expected. Be open to refining your operations as necessary to make sure nothing (or no one) is falling through the cracks.

- **Establish (or refocus) your rescue** as a responsible business that will be accountable to donors. Position the organization to be eligible for future grant awards.

There are a number of nuts-and-bolts organizational steps new rescues need to take to get started. Existing rescues will need to review and possibly update their formative documents and/or operational practices to move to a different business model.

- If you don't already have a rescue established, settle on a **name for your organization**. Set up a business by filing the appropriate paperwork with your state's corporation commission, applying for a federal [Employer Identification Number](#) from the Internal Revenue Service and seeking [tax-exempt status](#) for the rescue. The latter may take some time, so be patient. Fortunately, you have lots of other things to do while you wait!
- You will need to have a set of **bylaws** to lay out the purpose of the organization and the roles of its officers. Sample bylaws can be found on the internet. We strongly recommend setting up the business address at an off-site location such as a post office box rather than someone's home address to prevent the public from showing up to surrender kittens. Setting up a post office box also ensures consistency for the organization in the event of turnover in officers.
- Identify and/or reevaluate your **board of directors**. This should be three (per IRS guidelines) or more individuals, at least one of whom shares your passion for saving high-risk kittens from euthanasia. Initially, board members may need to be a working board: one that is composed of individuals who are "doers" who will roll up their sleeves and help you to get things done. You will therefore want to select people who each bring something special to the table in addition to their readiness to work hard: expertise in kitten care

(e.g., someone with a veterinary background who is willing to advise on basic care or will schedule medical appointments and represent the rescue when a kitten is in need of a higher level of care in a clinic or hospital); fundraising "chops"; financial expertise; and social media/website acumen. You could also benefit from someone to function as the foster coordinator, a role that will be particularly useful as you grow.

Friends and family are likely to be initial supporters and putting some of them on the board may be an option but be mindful to set clear expectations and boundaries in the beginning. Be very clear with each individual about expectations, including the estimated time and fundraising commitments.

- All rescues should have a **separate business checking account** to keep track of the expenses and income, separate from an officer's personal account or other, unrelated financial accounts. Set up the organization's books so you are able to easily track expenditures and revenue. Often a simple Excel spreadsheet is sufficient to get you started. In the beginning, simple cash-basis accounting should suffice; when/if you grow, you may need to switch to accrual accounting methods. You will be expected to file taxes with the IRS each year. Fortunately, the process is fairly simple—just a postcard—if you generate less than \$50,000 in revenue.
- Prepare a **budget** for board review and approval. It is important to have an idea of what the rescue could cost over the first year. This will also help you brainstorm ways to reduce costs through donated supplies (and labor). It is also important to have an idea of possible revenue options, so that (hopefully!) you (and your family and friends) do not have to fund the effort in its entirety. Nevertheless, you may need to self-fund this effort at the start, so you don't want to be surprised by its scope after you've started to take in kittens! The budget should consider the cost of specialty food and supplements that young kittens need, as well as visits to clinics and an allocation for veterinary medications. In the resources section we provide a sample budget template to get you started.
- **Set up the critical care nursery and recruit your support team.** Once you have identified a shelter with which to partner, you will need to establish the process for taking in kittens. While each shelter may have different protocols, we recommend the following:

The shelter will call the primary contact you've designated for the rescue to alert the rescue to a kitten(s) in need. The kittens will need to be picked up within a prescribed window of time (as short as two hours for neonates). Be aware of the hours your shelter partner is open for animals to come in—some may be open 24 hours a day—which will impact how available your organization's members need to be to pick up kittens in need. If your organization is unable to pick up kittens at all hours, communicate your available schedule to the partner shelter so it's clear when you will be in a position to accept intakes.

Once the kittens are transferred, assess their conditions and then stabilize them according to your intake protocols (a sample is included in the resources below). Rapid response to retrieving sick and injured kittens and neonates needing warmth and food immediately is what sets this kitten rescue model apart from many other rescues. It gives shelter partners confidence that you stand ready to help medically vulnerable kittens at a moment's notice, but it is also time intensive. We highly recommend having a rotation of people available to respond quickly and help prevent burnout.

While every shelter may have its own preferences with respect to the formality of the relationship with the kitten rescue partner, Newborn Kitten Rescue has verbal agreements with its shelter partners.

Once NKR accepts a kitten from a shelter, the kitten becomes the legal property of NKR, and the shelter counts this as a live release in its reports (a definite benefit to the shelter, as otherwise this kitten would be included in the organization's euthanasia statistics). When NKR returns a healthy kitten to the shelter, ownership transfers back to the shelter.

THE CRITICAL CARE NURSERY

Initially, the rescue will need at least one well-stocked and equipped critical care nursery (likely located in the home of a member). As you become more established, you may want to add more in the future. The nursery will be the kittens' first stop from the shelter, and it's here where kittens are assessed and stabilized before they are moved to a foster caregiver. This is incredibly time intensive work and often requires around-the-clock commitment on the part of the person or people operating the nursery. Having more than one intake location or additional volunteers to support the nursery will allow for meaningful breaks for everyone. It can be difficult but very gratifying work to save a kitten, unfortunately, this is also where a rescue is most vulnerable to burnout.

We strongly recommend you set up a primary critical care nursery and as many "backup" nurseries as necessary to help prevent the primary caregiver from being overwhelmed by the demands of operating a 24/7 nursery. As the rescue becomes more established, consider adding more intake locations that can serve as critical care nurseries. Whether you have one or multiple nurseries, it is critical to build in meaningful breaks between intakes so that whoever is acting as the primary intake location has an opportunity to rest and recharge. Some of these passionate caregivers will likely think they do not need a break; you must insist that they do. Requiring mandatory breaks will ensure caregivers are set up for success. Given the type of population the rescue is aiming to save, it is not unusual to lose critically ill kittens who arrive at the nursery. This loss, combined with long hours, can be especially hard on people.

The nursery will need its own dedicated space, separate from any resident pets and in an area that can be easily sanitized. You will want to have on hand an incubator or a small container with a heating pad, certain medications, specialty food and supplements, basic medical supplies and disinfectant. You will also want some basic medical equipment: thermometers, a nebulizer and an incubator with an oxygenator. A complete list is included in the resource section. If you are caring for multiple kittens, an erasable whiteboard will help you keep track of feeding/medication schedules. Daily care logs will provide a track record of a kitten's progress (such as weight gain) and any concerns about diarrhea, respiratory issues, etc. This document will serve as a helpful medical history in case a kitten needs to be taken to a veterinary clinic or hospital.

An incubator and oxygenator can be quite expensive---as much as \$1,500---so this might be too much for a new rescue starting out. A good substitute until a rescue can afford the full list of supplies is an easily sanitized plastic tub, half of which will have a heating pad, and lots of blankets. The heating pad should be one that provides constant heat and not be on a timer.

BUILDING A FOSTER TEAM

Once the kitten(s) have been stabilized and evaluated in the nursery, they can be transferred to one of the rescue's foster caregivers to make room for the next kitten(s) in need, or to take a break. The number of kittens you take in should not exceed the number of spaces in foster homes where they will receive care. If the person(s) overseeing the nursery is also serving as the foster coordinator, remember that person will be the primary point of contact for questions, medical concerns, supplies and logistical support. This workload can build quickly, so start small and don't recruit more foster caregivers than they are able to manage.

Next, in the case of unweaned kittens, bottle baby kittens will be transferred to skilled bottle baby fosters. Once a bottle baby is weaned, she moves to a weaned kitten foster caregiver to continue her convalescence and growth. This is a different model from traditional kitten fostering, where a foster parent may keep a litter through 8 weeks of age. In this model, we recommend freeing up bottle baby caregivers to receive new kittens.

Moving kittens to caregivers based on the little ones' developmental needs allows for the most efficient management of your capacity. It's also a helpful process for socializing kittens. It allows your rescue to recruit foster parents who may not yet be able to help with very vulnerable kittens, but who can provide wonderful care to weaned and healthy kittens who are waiting to be returned to the shelter for adoption.

In the beginning, it is likely your rescue may only have two to three foster caregivers. These will most likely be individuals you already know and/or already have experience caring for vulnerable kittens. But if not, your shelter partner may have staff or volunteers it can recommend to you. NKR has also found success in reaching out to the local veterinary school or veterinary technician program. The students there are very interested in caring for animals and are quite skilled, and some may be willing to foster for you.

When possible, seek out bottle baby caregivers who have already been trained to care for fragile neonatal kittens and who can spot the warning signs of a fading kitten, can administer medications, and are able to avoid aspirating a kitten who is difficult to feed. It may not be possible to recruit experienced caregivers, so your rescue's strategic plan should include guidelines for recruiting and training new foster caregivers.

Existing and experienced caregivers can also become wonderful mentors to volunteers who want to learn more specialized skills; you may want to host "specialty" training opportunities on topics such as tube feeding and administering subcutaneous fluids to build your volunteers' skill sets.

You may have interested volunteers who aren't yet ready to foster but who can save your rescue valuable time by transporting kittens from the shelter to the nursery, delivering supplies and medications to foster caregivers, or driving kittens to the veterinary clinic. Some medications cannot be delivered by mail and are needed immediately; transportation volunteers can make these deliveries when the caregivers can't pick up the medications themselves.





Developing a clear process for new volunteers can save a lot of time and ensure you're recruiting the people who can best meet your rescue's needs. NKR's process for volunteer recruitment includes an interview to learn more about what a potential volunteer can provide and whether their skill set, and available time meet the rescue's needs. Given the fragile nature of the kittens entering this type of program, your rescue may not be able to accommodate foster applicants who are looking to learn how to care for fragile neonates; you may need to focus on people who already have experience working with this population. However, those less experienced in critical care may be good volunteers for other components of the rescue. Consider redirecting their enthusiasm into fundraising or other areas of need.

We recommend discussing the following with each applicant:

1. The skill set of the applicant, including any previous experience
2. Their willingness and ability to bottle feed a kitten on a two-to-four-hour schedule
3. Whether the applicant fosters for another organization
4. Whether they are able to keep foster kittens separate from resident animals
5. Whether they are able to bring kittens to appointments
6. Whether they are willing to administer oral and topical medications
7. Whether they are willing and able to care for kittens with special conditions such as those with ringworm or who require tube feeding or subcutaneous fluids

We highly recommend that each volunteer—regardless of their role—review and sign a volunteer agreement. Potential volunteers should review all of your rescue's policies and procedures ahead of signing an agreement to allow for any questions to be answered (see the Resources section for sample agreements). Knowing what is expected of volunteers is important both for you and for the foster caregivers. It helps ensure expectations and provides a clear process if a volunteer is no longer a match and needs to exit the rescue. We've found that caregivers appreciate knowing exactly what's expected of them. If we must part ways, clear expectations often help make the decision mutually understood. Ultimately, what matters most is providing the best possible care to our kittens.

Before a foster caregiver receives their first kitten(s), you will need to train them in any areas where they have no previous training. They should be comfortable meeting the demanding needs of bottle feeding fragile neonatal kittens and be able to recognize warning signs when these kittens aren't thriving. Bottle feeders with a bit more veterinary experience should be able to tube feed little ones who haven't yet latched onto a bottle and/or know how to administer subcutaneous fluids and/or vaccines. All foster caregivers must be able to administer oral and topical medications and be comfortable with the 24/7 nature of care the littlest ones require. To guide (and train) your foster team, have kitten care protocols developed in coordination with a veterinarian that provide guidance to all caregivers about how to do everything from bottle feeding to deep cleaning the kitten space. See the Resources section for example protocols.

Your foster team will benefit as well from a foster manual, however brief, that provides in one location all internal communication methods such as phone numbers and email addresses of those who can answer medical and behavioral questions, care protocols and ways to address minor health concerns and recognize signs of serious illness. It could also contain feeding and fecal charts and/or a brief discussion about kitten behavior health (suckling and kitten enrichment). It should include some sanitation guidelines to keep kittens healthy and to avoid cross contamination between litters. Your manual can have templates for the daily care log and a kitten profile (for when the kitten is returned to the shelter for adoption).

You should also be prepared for foster caregiver turnover or for periods of time when foster caregivers need a break—either for personal or foster-related reasons. Volunteers may have changes in their personal lives that impact their ability to continue, or they may learn that caring for extremely vulnerable kittens is more than they're able to manage, emotionally or logically. This is okay, and we'd rather that volunteers recognize they may be burning out or experiencing compassion fatigue than feel forced to continue. It's important to factor in the natural turnover that occurs with foster caregivers and develop a plan to reduce your intake until new foster parents are recruited. You should also find temporary foster options to cover the period of turnover.

Finally—again, before you take in a single kitten!—prepare a spreadsheet or database that will help you track each kitten. It should include information such as their intake date, weight and condition, their medications and scheduled vaccinations, as well as how their health and weight are progressing. It will also tell you which foster caregiver has which kitten. NKR uses a free shelter software that allows organizations to easily upload a photo of your kittens, add medical data to animal records, and upload medical reports from any clinics your kitten(s) may visit. There are multiple free shelter and rescue database options, and we encourage organizations to research which software will best fit their needs.

We require caregivers to send in a photo and weight for each of their foster kittens—as well as their supply needs—twice a month. This helps us monitor how well a kitten is progressing in foster care. Many shelter software systems can also generate a medical history that can be provided to the shelter for each kitten returned for adoption, and the photo progressions can be used to tell stories on social media or in fundraising and grant requests.

RECRUITING A VET SUPPORT TEAM

It can be hard to find veterinary professionals—veterinarians, veterinary technicians and assistants—with the specialized knowledge required to care for very young kittens. Care of kittens younger than 8 weeks is still an emerging field of study and is not typically taught extensively in veterinary schools. Most veterinary professionals do not see kittens in their private practice until after their clients have adopted a kitten, and that kitten is usually at least 8 weeks old. Organizations such as the National Kitten Coalition are working to get very young kitten care information into the hands of the veterinary community via their resources and an annual conferences,

with speakers who are experts on various topics related to at-risk kitten care (see kittencoalition.org/programs).

NKR has found that veterinarians and veterinary technicians interested in supporting vulnerable kittens are best found at local shelters. (This is also where we've found some of our more experienced foster caregivers.) These veterinary professionals can offer consultations on nettlesome medical cases (which they are more likely to see in a shelter). You will have to do some research, but we have found private practices in our communities that are willing to treat neonatal kittens, too. (Be sure to ask for a nonprofit discount!) They often have staff who are very interested in caring for high-needs kittens and, they can become great advocates. For those starting out, building a relationship with veterinarians at your partner shelter will be your best bet.

If you are successful in establishing a relationship with a shelter veterinarian who has taken an interest in your rescue, they may be able and willing to order simple medications such as antibiotics and topical creams at lower-than-retail costs. Otherwise, you will be reliant on private clinics and hospitals for your medications.

You will need veterinary professionals to help with vaccines and medical assessments (some of which can be done via text) and, on occasion, house calls. Keeping the kitten in the foster's home—rather than transporting them to the veterinary facility—is in the best interest of the kitten's health as it minimizes stress, cross-contamination with animals outside the home or unnecessary exposure to external elements. But until you can bring these professionals on board, you should expect that someone from your rescue will be doing the lion's share of the medical assessments, so be sure to recruit someone with that knowledge.





KITTEN INTAKE

Whew! You've addressed all the foundational questions and activities. You have a structure, a team of foster caregivers and a shelter ready to hand you kittens. You are ready for kittens!

But first, a caveat: Consider starting modestly and growing slowly, carefully and incrementally as your bandwidth allows. At first you will want to take in every kitten the shelter/rescue may need to euthanize, whether that's 20 kittens or 200 but, if your starting capacity is 10 kittens, or 50, you will need to be realistic and hold to those limits. One important way to manage your capacity while minimizing the need to say no will be to proactively communicate with your shelter partner to let them know when you have capacity and how many kittens you can intake.

Stay focused on your mission: to save kittens who are sick, injured or underweight and would otherwise be euthanized *at your partner shelter*. Make it clear on your website and all your social media platforms that you work exclusively with shelters, and that anyone who finds abandoned kittens should take them to a nearby shelter. If that shelter is unable to accept them, it will call your rescue. Animal welfare is an industry that sees an extraordinary amount of burnout and turnover. This work is consuming and often stressful—but always very gratifying as you watch your little charges “graduate” into loving, adoptive homes. Streamlining intake through a local shelter frees up time that can be focused on the kittens themselves. It is better to save 10 or 50 kittens for several years running, rather than needing to shut down the rescue due to burnout.

You are the first step in what happens next. Contact your partner shelter and let them know you are ready to intake (e.g., up to five kittens). **Once a shelter reaches that threshold, ask it to wait until you let it know you have capacity to accept more kittens.** This will save you the dilemma when a shelter asks you to intake more kittens than you have capacity for, and the heartache over having to say no when you know that a little kitten may need to be euthanized.

After you have assessed and stabilized the kittens, you can decide which foster caregiver is best equipped to care for them. This will depend on the experience of the foster caregiver and the developmental needs of the kittens. Most likely you will receive neonates, so a kitten's first placement will go to a bottle baby foster. There, the little one will be cared for through weaning, about five weeks of age or so. Once a kitten is weaned, she is moved to a weaned kitten foster, who will care for her until she is healthy and makes weight for spay/neuter and adoption (usually 2 pounds, which tends to occur around 8 weeks of age). By rotating kittens this way, you will free up a precious bottle baby foster to accept new kittens (after that foster caregiver has had a bit of recovery time—bottle feeding tiny kittens is exhausting!).

As the public will contact you asking if you will take kittens they have found, you can set up an auto reply through Facebook or your website that gently states your policy to only accept kittens from the shelter and then directs the finders to those shelters (along with their contact information) for help.

As you plan for capacity, understand that foster caregivers may occasionally go out of town or need a break from caregiving. Some shelter software systems include a calendar option that allows caregivers to mark any dates they are unavailable. Plan for this and be prepared to move a kitten to another volunteer or take her back into the nursery. It's helpful if caregivers can alert you as far in advance as possible when they're going to be unavailable. It's a good idea to maintain a roster of short-term caregivers to step in as needed to fill these gaps.

While you are caring for kittens, remember not to neglect the **administrative duties** of your job running your rescue. Ensure that the bills are paid, the bookkeeping is up to date and your board is doing all that its members have agreed to do. Make sure you have stocks of supplies you and your foster caregivers will need to avoid wasting valuable time reordering formula, which takes three or four days for delivery. (We keep a modicum of supplies on hand for last-minute needs, but we typically have supplies shipped directly to our foster homes. An exception to this is when we have a food drive with lots of food delivered to a single location and distributed to or picked up by caregivers. We've also found that periodic supply chain issues have sometimes delayed deliveries of wet or dry food. This unpredictable situation has sent many of us running to local pet stores in search of elusive supplies.)

Speaking of ordering supplies: You will quickly see that you need (more) money, so don't forget to plan a fundraising strategy.



FUNDING YOUR RESCUE

Your rescue will need to spend some money, even when you start small. Whether it comes out of your pocket or through a generous donor (or more likely some combination of these) will determine how sustainable this project will be. The budget you developed before you took in your first kitten will give you some guidance for how much you'll need over the course of the year. Keep your board fully informed about your financial situation, no matter how bleak. They are part of your team; they will want you to succeed, and they should be ready and willing to help out financially, either by donating money or raising it from other sources. It can be difficult to ask for money, so make sure to recruit someone who is comfortable leading your fundraising efforts. If you are able to tell a compelling story about the kittens you are saving and

clearly describe how donated funds will be used, it will be easier to find people and businesses that will want to support you.

One valuable resource will be your local community. Everyone loves kittens, and no one wants to see them euthanized, so your mission will resonate with many. With a view to reducing your expenses to the bare minimum, your local community will be an important source for everything from donated bottles to veterinary care, so plan to develop relationships with potential supporters. Is your local pet supply store willing to help you hold a "kitten shower" or donate surplus kitten supplies? Enlist your board members and leverage their contacts to bring in supplies and funds. Create an Amazon and/or Chewy wishlist and ask your board to email the link to their networks. Launch a food drive using your social media platforms.

When you are building relationships with local veterinarians, be sure to ask about nonprofit discounts. Many clinics will offer 10%-30% off their fees when working with rescues, or they may have discounts on medications they can pass along to your rescue.

Community support will build over time as you develop a track record and as you forge new connections with fellow animal lovers, local businesses and contacts generated through your board. Leverage your social media platforms and relationships with your foster caregivers to help tell your story and cultivate a community of supporters. Have an active presence on Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, and other social media platforms, featuring your cutest kitten pictures and videos, especially "before-and-after" stories. As you build a following, you will reach potential donors. These are the platforms you will use to make appeals and raise funds in support of your work. Once you're approved, Facebook allows nonprofits to use its pages to solicit and receive donations. Encourage your supporters to launch "birthday fundraisers" on Facebook and name you as the beneficiary. Facebook can become a great source of revenue for you. Even better, it doesn't charge any fees, will issue a receipt to your donor and will dispense funds to you twice a month.

Consider enrolling in Amazon Smile, a program that enables your supporters to designate your charity as a beneficiary, with you receiving a small percentage of the money from their Amazon purchases. This passive funding source is an excellent way to begin to build a recurring revenue stream.

Keep track of and cultivate your donors. Send thank-you notes promptly, keep them up to date on your progress and mention them on your social media platforms, checking first to make sure they are OK with being named. (As an alternative, just mention their first name.) Some metrics your donors may be interested in include: the number of kittens you rescue has taken in; how many foster caregivers you are supporting; and how many kittens (who would have otherwise been euthanized) have been returned to your shelter partners for adoption to loving homes.

Every community is different in its ability to respond to requests for financial support. Remember you have a powerful thing going for you in every town across the country: You can demonstrate that a donation to your rescue will save kittens' lives.

INITIAL CHALLENGES

Rescuing kittens with critical care needs presents a number of challenges. If you are thinking about starting a rescue or changing the focus of your existing rescue to meet this need, it is important to know these challenges will present themselves at some points during your first and subsequent years, so be prepared to deal with them.

They include:

- Relentless **demand for your services** during peak kitten season that outpaces the capacity of your critical care nursery. This is why it's important to have a strong relationship with your partner shelter and resist the temptation to intake kittens from the public. You will want to minimize the need to say no to new intakes if they jeopardize your ability to care for the kittens you already have. (See suggestions above for how to interact with your partner shelter and respond to the public to minimize these situations.)
- **Finding veterinarians** who understand feline neonatal care and are willing to provide your rescue with medical support. We have found that veterinarians associated with shelters tend to have the most experience dealing with the special needs of very young kittens. Finding one or more willing to work with you may be a challenge, as most are very busy caring for shelter animals.



- Providing **rapid response** to your foster caregivers with questions and concerns about their little charges and getting them the supplies - and other support - they need quickly when they are spread throughout a large geographic area. Your rescue may want to assign a team of two or three volunteers who field these questions, rather than putting all that load on one person.
- **Finding critical care foster caregivers** who are able to administer fluids, tube feed and work around the clock to support your most fragile intakes. It has been NKR's experience that, as word spreads about your rescue, people experienced in caring for critically sick animals may contact you. Many appreciate the high levels of support we give our foster caregivers (delivering supplies directly to their homes, 24/7 medical support and in-home health assessments for the little ones).

To prepare for requests that originate with the public, we recommend setting up an auto reply through Facebook or your website that gently states your policy to only accept kittens from the shelter and then directs the finders to those shelters (along with their contact information) for help.

- Finding money to pay for **veterinary costs** when the needs and costs are unpredictable. The money is there, and people will respond to a compelling story of a kitten facing higher-than-usual medical expenses. Be sure to build a reserve into your budget for extraordinary veterinary expenses. As you grow and develop a track record, you will be able to tap a larger pool of grant funding opportunities.
- Being **financially dependent** on a few sources of income/donors until your donor base grows. Of course, this is the bane of every new nonprofit. Cultivate and thank your donors often, especially in the early days, and continue to leverage your and your board's networks to cultivate and grow your donor base.
- **Dealing with infectious diseases and isolation issues.** Neonatal kittens' immune systems are very fragile. Proper sanitization and isolation, especially for cases of ringworm, are critical.
- **Managing the stress** of providing 24/7 critical care to fragile neonates. Time off to recuperate is imperative. Find ways to temporarily shift responsibilities to other people, to more effectively manage intakes and ensure that task does not all fall on just one person. It also means contracting for operational and specialty support that would otherwise be provided by you and board members. For example, NKR suspends intakes on Oct. 1 as "kitten season" comes to a close in Phoenix, and we don't resume intakes until March. This gives foster caregivers an opportunity to rest up and recharge for the coming season.



Step 2: You're Ready to Grow

After your first or second year, you may be in a position to grow. As you likely learned from Step 1, there is certainly room to grow—to welcome more foster caregivers to your team and to take in more kittens. You will know you are ready to grow if you have established yourself in the local rescue community, developed a solid core of foster caregivers, have a track record of success, built a following on your social media platforms, and have a reliable and growing donor base. While your earlier efforts have been spent setting up and getting started, this phase shifts your energy toward ensuring that you will be able to rescue at-risk kittens for years to come.

To support growth, you will need to build up each of these assets. You will need to decide whether to: partner with more local shelters; implement new or expand existing systems that will make your operations more efficient; grow your kitten caregiver team; and open up new funding streams with grants and donations from more individuals or companies.

ASSESSING & EXPANDING PARTNERSHIPS

Are you working well with your shelter partner? Are everyone's expectations being met? Are there new procedures that need to be implemented? Can you take more kittens from this shelter? Should you consider partnering with other shelters in your area? Do you have the capacity and support you need to accept additional kittens from a new partner? These are all good questions you should consider as you decide if it is time to grow.

ASSESSING & GROWING THE BOARD

You've gotten this far thanks to a dedicated board of directors and volunteers who are willing to roll up their sleeves and get things done. These "doers" have been responsible for the operation of the organization and financial stability of your rescue. As much as each of them contributes, it may be time to ask yourself whether it's time to augment and grow your board to include people who bring additional expertise to the table.

In addition, take time to assess if all of your board members are doing what's expected of them. Are any becoming overwhelmed by all the work? Are there potential new members with pertinent expertise who should be invited to join the board? As you grow, you will want to augment and eventually transition your board to a team of skilled advisers who can help you raise funds. Consider looking for and recruiting passionate animal lovers who are also attorneys, veterinarians, accountants or philanthropists.

To grow, you will also need to think more seriously about engaging outside professionals to do more of the often unglamorous but necessary work of running a nonprofit. For example, while a volunteer may have previously been able to file a simple 990N to the IRS to meet your tax obligations, your rescue may now be obligated to file a longer form, the 990EZ or even a form 990. While you may have been able to get by with cash-basis accounting (something straightforward for a volunteer who is not an accountant), your financial picture may have changed, and tracking revenues and expenses with accrual accounting methods may be more effective. A bookkeeper and an accounting professional may be needed.

This is also a time to take steps to ensure the long-term sustainability of your rescue. A tiny rescue operated solely by volunteers runs the risk of disrupted operations or, even worse, a shutdown if a key person or two leaves the organization. It's also possible that your board members may not be willing or able to do the work of a growing nonprofit. If you have the funding, consider seasonal contracts for key functions to support your work and ensure the continuity and stability of your operation.

GROWING YOUR VOLUNTEER BASE

When it's time to grow your organization's team of foster caregivers and other volunteers, be sure you are supporting that team with the resources and energy it needs for long-term success. You will have learned by now what it takes to provide reliable medical support, supplies and encouragement to the caregivers who are the heart of your organization. They will also be your greatest ambassadors as you seek out new team members, donors and volunteers.

You will need a focal point for this valued team, such as a foster coordinator who will recruit, meet with applicants and onboard new caregivers. This critical role will serve as a primary point of contact for your foster team, making sure everyone understands your rescue's processes and protocols. This person will schedule the transfer of kittens from bottle baby caregivers to weaned kitten caregivers and then determine when a kitten is ready to be returned to your partner shelter for adoption. This person will also coordinate closely with the medical team lead to schedule kittens for any veterinary needs, then follow up with foster caregivers regarding any after care and/or medications. The foster coordinator will help you cultivate these relationships and make sure each caregiver knows they are valued. They will conduct an end-of season survey, assess the feedback and make recommendations on your organization's policies, operations and leadership.

When looking to recruit new caregivers, reach out to your experienced foster caregivers and ask for referrals or recommendations. Online applications are useful here and can be created through most shelter software systems. Be clear and up front in your expectations. You may find candidates who have a wealth of experience and require minimal training, or candidates may need more onboarding support than your original group of caregivers. Decide what level you can realistically support before you begin recruitment, and then target your outreach accordingly. Perhaps you can take on only experienced foster caregivers, so you should focus your efforts on local veterinary schools, veterinary clinics, or animal shelters.

The foster coordinator, in consultation with the board, will plan an in-person celebration and "thank you" for all your rescue's foster caregivers, volunteers and board members. Be sure to include representatives from your partner shelter. This is a great opportunity to build goodwill and for the board to meet and thank all the people who work so hard to save high-needs kittens who would otherwise be euthanized.

At this stage in your rescue's development, it may also be beneficial to assess how foster caregivers communicate with the rescue and other caregivers. NKR uses an instant messaging platform that allows us to send messages individually and to specific chat groups. We encourage organizations to implement a system that allows you to easily share photos, short videos, files and documents directly to these individuals and chat groups. Examples of helpful chat groups may include Bottle Baby Fosters, Weaned Kitten Fosters, Transport, Board of Directors and A Medical Concern. These chat groups enable caregivers to connect with our medical support team, while the foster

coordinator provides administrative support and monitors the discussions.

A private group on social media can be a valuable way foster caregivers can ask questions of each other, post photos of their little charges and share experiences. Our private group was originally intended as a forum for non-urgent medical questions and other general communications, but it evolved into a place where caregivers offer each other encouraging words and share stories and photos of the kittens in their care. Some of those stories and images became a great source for our public social media platforms.



GROWING YOUR MEDICAL CAPABILITIES

The medical support you provide to your caregivers and the kittens they look after will be one of the most critical functions for your rescue, and it's an area where you will most certainly have to spend money in order to grow. This service is critically important—and the fragility and volatility of kittens' medical needs create the dangerous potential to overwhelm you mentally, emotionally and financially. If you could not find dedicated, mobile on-call veterinary support during your startup phase, you will want them now, even if you need to pay. Now is the time to realize you cannot do it all, and that a solid team will provide relief for individuals in the rescue to field all medical inquiries. Your medical team will have a lead, just as the foster program has a coordinator. It will also have at least one person with veterinary experience—most likely a veterinary technician—who can go to fosters' homes to assess a kitten's health, administer vaccinations and medications and, on occasion, retrieve a kitten in need of a higher level of care.

Depending on how many kittens you have in care, one or two “mobile vet techs” should be able to adequately handle the house calls of a rescue that has up to 25 caregivers caring for up to 45 kittens at any point in time. (Understand that some foster parents will be caring for multiple kittens or even multiple litters.) The medical team should also have several people with experience in neonatal kitten care who will be available to monitor a messaging application to respond to minor, nonemergency inquiries. We’ve had success enlisting help from students at a local veterinary school. They will also respond to calls and messages from fosters regarding medical concerns, follow up with foster caregivers, maintain medical records, communicate with veterinarians, follow and help develop medical protocols, collect and assess weight data, evaluate symptoms, deliver prescriptions and assist with intakes.

For those foster caregivers who want to develop additional skills, the veterinary technicians will train them to provide more specialized care for kittens, such as administering fluids and tube feeding.

At this stage, you may want to reconsider how to handle late-night or weekend emergencies and whether to use a free/low-cost service that filters all calls through a single, transferrable phone number from which the foster coordinator and medical team can call or text. We give our foster caregivers a single number that can be shared by several medical team members and used to contact us in the case of an overnight emergency.

We also created a schedule whereby a veterinary support person agrees to be on call in case a foster caregiver believes a kitten is fading. Having a rotation of people on call helps prevent burnout. The assigned support person will respond immediately, assess the situation and determine whether to direct the caregiver to take the kitten to an overnight emergency clinic. That person may also meet them at the emergency clinic. Note: This happens very rarely (once per season) at NKR. Nearly all of the inquiries we receive from caregivers involve minor medical concerns—such as diarrhea—where a response within a few hours is acceptable. The real value in providing 24/7 medical support, beyond ensuring that caregivers (and kittens) are being well supported, is the peace of mind you will have knowing that the coverage is being provided by skilled, knowledgeable people.

Another very important member of this team will be a licensed veterinarian who is willing to consult with you or your medical team lead regarding kittens with complicated diagnoses/conditions and is able to write prescriptions. Having such a team member is crucial for kittens with neurological conditions or certain injuries, or kittens who

aren’t responding to traditional treatments as outlined in your protocols. This veterinarian will advise you on whether a kitten needs to see a specialist, help you interpret medical reports and offer guidance on further treatments.

If you are able to find volunteers who will serve on your medical team without compensation, count your lucky stars! This type of work is a big ask for veterinary professionals, many of whom are already working in clinics or in school. Be ready to write seasonal contracts with some of these team members and pay a small stipend.



GROWING YOUR FINANCIAL BASE

It should be no surprise that the costs associated with caring for sick, injured and underweight kittens can be volatile, and the care of these kittens can be quite expensive. A kitten you rescue who has a minor respiratory infection may devolve into viral pneumonia and require a \$1,000 hospital stay. Another kitten with the exact same symptoms will recover nicely after a round or two of antibiotics. Kittens’ immune systems are underdeveloped and fragile, and one ailment will often disguise another. The good news is that there are animal lovers, companies and foundations that will want to help you succeed.

After you’ve built a solid track record and assembled a skilled team, start applying for grants from funding sources that focus on animal welfare. You just have to tell a compelling story and back it up with data. Describe what you will use donations for as clearly as possible. We’ve had great success with medical appeals. For the most part, grantors want to see their money go to your direct expenses: medications, veterinary care, foster supplies and veterinary equipment such as incubators and wood lamps. Check out [Best Friends Animal Society](#), Rachel Ray and [Athletes for Animals](#) as potential funders. Does your state

have a community foundation, an organization that pools funds from donors and grants money to worthy nonprofits?

Keep an eye on grant tracking websites, including:

bankofamerica.com/philanthropic/search-for-grants

grantgopher.com/Grants-for-Nonprofits

candid.org/find-nonprofit-funding

animalgrantmakers.org/

A word about Orphan Kitten Club: This nonprofit, founded by Hannah Shaw (aka “The Kitten Lady”), is focused on the very population your rescue will be working with. In addition to caring for at-risk kittens in its state-of-the-art nursery, this incredible organization provides both medical and programmatic grants geared entirely toward (obviously) the care of orphaned kittens. It funded the first year of NKR’s mobile veterinary technicians and, in the following year, a foster coordinator. It also helped us launch Ringbusters, an innovative program that provided the supplies and specialized testing we needed to care for kittens afflicted with ringworm, a highly contagious but very treatable fungal infection. Once Orphan Kitten Club has accepted you as a partner, your rescue will become eligible to apply for funds to support your work. If you haven’t already done so, reach out to this very special organization and introduce yourself!

Continue to build your social media presence. Consider recruiting a volunteer to handle your social media content and assess whether to expand to other platforms, such as TikTok or YouTube. With some time under your rescue’s belt, it will be important to have key metrics available that demonstrate the impact of your work.

These can include: number of kittens rescued; number of active foster caregivers; success rate (the number of kittens returned to the partner shelters for adoption, divided by the number of kittens taken in from the shelters); and your reach through various social media platforms or grants awarded. Each of these offers prospective donors a track record of your success and will assure them that their funds will help you deliver results. As your donor base grows, also consider an affordable donor management system to help you reach and keep track of your donors.

Expand your community outreach to include local chamber of commerce meetings, and budget to attend national cat conferences where you can share the successes and challenges that your rescue faces. As word gets out, more people will be motivated to donate!



Defining Success

There are a variety of metrics you can use to measure your rescue's effectiveness, and there is indeed a need to develop ways to measure your success. Every kitten you save will be one who was at risk for euthanasia. Keep track of the number of kittens you return to your partner shelter for adoption, the number of foster caregivers you support, and the average cost to care for and feed a kitten, including the cost of specialty food and medications. Not only will this information be required for grant applications and preparing an annual report for your donors, but it also helps tell a story and build confidence among your donors and supporters that the funds, time and effort they invest with your rescue is paying off in lives saved.

To us, success means knowing that you gave these sick, injured and underweight kittens an opportunity to live full lives in loving adoptive homes. It's in forming mutually beneficial partnerships and building a coalition of people who are passionate about saving little lives, one tiny kitten at a time.



Resources

Intake protocols – coming soon!

Medical protocols – coming soon!

[Basic foster supply list](#)

[Daily care log](#)

[Foster agreement](#)

[Newborn Kitten Rescue](#)

[The National Kitten Coalition resources](#)

*All resources reflect best practices at time of publication. We recommend that each organization work with a licensed veterinarian in their state to review and implement their own best practices.



©2022 THE HSUS. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

PHOTO CREDITS: FRONT COVER: RAVS/THE HSUS; PAGE 2: LYDIA SATTLER/THE HSUS; PAGE 3: MOLLY TAMULEVICH/THE HSUS; PAGE 5: ESPANOLA HUMANE;
PAGE 6: MIKE MCFARLAND/THE HSUS; PAGE 9: ANN ARBOR MILLER/THE HSUS; PAGE 10: MICHELLE RILEY/THE HSUS; PAGE 11: SONYA WILLIAMS; PAGE 12: MIKE
MCFARLAND/THE HSUS; PAGE 13: RAVS/THE HSUS; PAGE 14: KATHY MILANI/THE HSUS; PAGE 15: MICHELLE RILEY/THE HSUS, PAGE 17: LANCE MURPHEY/THE AP; PAGE 18: ALEX
ROTHLISBERGER/HSI; PAGE 19: GAYLE SHOMER BREZICKI/THE HSUS; PAGE 20: AMIE CHOU/THE HSUS