



**Humane
World for
Animals™**

Formerly called the
Humane Society of the United States



newborn kitten rescue



Saving Kittens in Partnership

A guide for helping kittens with critical care needs



Table of contents

Introduction	3
About Newborn Kitten Rescue	3
The SKIP model	5
Step 1: How to begin	7
Determining your focus	7
Before you take in a single kitten...get organized!	7
The critical care nursery	9
Transferring kittens to foster care	10
Building a foster team	10
Establishing a tracking system	12
Recruiting a veterinary support team	12
Starting kitten intakes	12
Managing capacity	13
Funding your rescue	14
Initial challenges	14
Step 2: You're ready to grow	16
Assessing and expanding partnerships	16
Assessing and growing your board	16
Growing your volunteer base	17
Growing your medical capabilities	18
Growing your financial base	19
Defining success	20
Resources	21

Download this guide and related resources at humanepro.org/saving-kittens.

A close-up photograph of a fluffy white and grey kitten. The kitten is looking directly at the camera with wide, curious eyes. Its front paws are raised high, showing pink pads. It has a pink collar with a gold bell around its neck. The background is softly blurred, showing a window and a patterned surface.

About Humane World for Animals

The Humane Society of the United States and Humane Society International are now known as Humane World for Animals. As the leading voice in the animal protection space, we work to end the cruelest practices, care for animals in crisis and build a stronger animal protection movement. With millions of supporters and work happening in over 50 countries, we aim to achieve the vision behind our name: a kinder world for animals.

Introduction

This guide is brought to you through a collaboration between Newborn Kitten Rescue, the National Kitten Coalition and Humane World for Animals (formerly called the Humane Society of the United States) thanks to a generous supporter.

Kittens are one of the most vulnerable populations in animal shelters, rescues and throughout our communities. Kittens may experience a variety of medical needs early in their lives. Some need immediate care for injuries, upper respiratory or eye infections, ringworm or neurological issues, or they may simply be underweight newborns in need of warmth and a bottle of kitten milk replacement around the clock.

When shelters work 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 at-risk kittens and may even inspire you to successfully start an organization focused on helping kittens reach adoption age.

About Newborn Kitten Rescue

Newborn Kitten Rescue, an Arizona nonprofit, began in 2018 as a small, all-volunteer rescue with just a handful of board members and experienced fosters who were united in their passion for saving at-risk kittens who otherwise may have been euthanized. At the time, there were a handful of small, independent rescues in metropolitan Phoenix that worked specifically with orphaned neonatal kittens, but none specialized exclusively in caring for sick, injured or underweight neonates or other at-risk kittens.

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 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 partner. Initially, we worked solely with the Arizona Humane Society, 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 in 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 doesn't meet its intake criteria for the intensive care unit because they're 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 veterinary clinic or hospital. We don't 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 our organization takes in.

NKR doesn't accept kitten intakes from the public and, unlike other private rescues, we don't 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 isn't 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 800 kittens. 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

Newborn Kitten Rescue developed the Saving Kittens in Partnership model to support “last chance” kittens whom local shelters lack the resources 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.

Every shelter varies in its capacity to care for kittens with special needs. In our area, we focus on neonatal kittens (“bottle babies”) with other health problems that can’t be adequately addressed by shelter staff or foster caregivers trained to bottle-feed; weaned kittens with health issues; and 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 often be saved.

The SKIP model has four main components:

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 it doesn’t exceed its capacity for care, the rescue doesn’t take in kittens from the public, only from the shelter, and instead routes members of the public to the local shelter. 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 at the home of one of the rescue’s primary volunteers or founders with the expertise—and space—to care for kittens in need of emergency care. In the critical care nursery, the kittens receive 24-7 care from a dedicated volunteer (or team of volunteers) who are trained to care for them.

THIRD, once the kittens are stabilized, they’re transferred to

trained foster caregivers according to each caregiver’s experience with the kittens’ developmental or veterinary needs. At NKR, because we focus on saving kittens in need of critical care, our foster caregivers are especially skilled in caring for sick, injured and underweight kittens and receive consistent support from the rescue. They’re also 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 foster supply list at humanepro.org/saving-kittens.) 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 doesn’t 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 can’t care for by feeding them, treating them for illness or injury, and improving their health using veterinarian-approved procedures and protocols.



A note on terminology

While shelters do more than take in animals and adopt them out, for the purposes of this guide, we use the following definitions:

- 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 they find adoptive homes.
- A **rescue** is defined as a foster-based nonprofit staffed primarily by volunteers.
- A **foster** caregiver is a person who cares for a small number of animals in their home.



Step 1: How to begin

Determining your focus

This guide provides the basic steps for starting a rescue that works collaboratively with shelters to save at-risk kittens. It provides information for shelters about what to expect from a partner in the effort, but the bulk of this guide is geared toward people interested in establishing or refocusing a rescue that will work with a partner shelter to save kittens.

Much of your rescue's goals will be tailored to the unique needs of your shelter partner, the number of trained foster caregivers you can 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's imperative that you meet with your local shelter to learn about the challenges they face so you can build a program to address those niche areas. Maybe they have a large volume of foster homes but lack the bandwidth to train a significant number 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. Filling the gaps should be a primary driver of your rescue group's mission and focus.

In your first year, you should 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.

Find a shelter partner. Identify a local shelter you'd like to partner with, and 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.

Draft a mission statement. Write a mission statement that affirms your rescue's desire to partner with shelters to save high-needs kittens whom shelters are unable, or not resourced, to care for. Your organization's mission will be a function of the

Step 1: How to begin

needs of your partner shelters. 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.

Create goals. Set some modest goals for what you can realistically achieve in 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. Be careful not to jump into the deep end without first learning how to swim.

Attend to business basics. 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. (Check out the *Rescue Group Best Practices Guide* at humanepro.org/rescuebestpractices for guidance.)

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'll 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. Using a post office box also ensures consistency for the organization in the event of turnover in officers.

Form your board. Identify 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. Initially, board members may need to be a working board: one that is composed of people who will roll up their sleeves and help with the day-to-day work of caring for kittens and running a nonprofit. You'll want to select people who 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 needs a higher level of care in a vet clinic or hospital); fundraising skills; 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 may be initial supporters, and putting some of them on the board may be an option, but be sure to set clear expectations and boundaries. Be very clear with each individual about the estimated time and fundraising commitments.

Track your finances. All rescues should have a business checking account to keep track of expenses and income, separate from an officer's personal account or other, unrelated financial accounts. Set up the organization's books so you're able to easily track expenditures and revenue. Often a simple spreadsheet is sufficient to get you started.

In the beginning, simple cash-basis accounting should suffice; if you grow, you may need to switch to accrual accounting methods. You'll need to file a tax return with the IRS each year. Fortunately, the process is fairly simple—just a postcard—if you generate less than \$50,000 in revenue.

Set a budget. Prepare a budget for board review and approval. It's 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's also important

to have an idea of possible revenue options, so that (hopefully!) you (and your family and friends) don't 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 veterinary clinics and an allocation for medications. (You can find a budget template at humanepro.org/saving-kittens.)

Create transfer and intake protocols. Once you've identified a shelter partner, you'll need to establish the process for taking in kittens. While each shelter may have different protocols, we recommend the following:

- The shelter will alert your rescue's designated primary contact when there is 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 intakes—some may be open 24 hours a day—which will impact how available your organization's members need to be to pick up kittens. 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'll be in a position to accept intakes.
- Once the kittens are transferred to your care, assess their condition and then stabilize them according to your intake protocols. 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's also time-intensive. To help prevent burnout, we highly recommend having a rotation of people available for quick response.
- 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 our legal property, and the shelter counts this as a live release in its reports. When NKR returns a healthy kitten to the shelter, ownership transfers back to the shelter.

The critical care nursery

Your rescue will need at least one well-stocked and equipped critical care nursery (likely located in a member's home). The nursery will be the kittens' first stop from the shelter. It's where they'll be assessed and stabilized before they're moved to a foster caregiver.

Operating the critical care nursery is incredibly time-intensive

work and often requires around-the-clock commitment. 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 volunteer 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 so that everyone has an opportunity to rest and recharge.

Some passionate caregivers will likely think they don't need a break; you must insist that they do. Requiring breaks will ensure caregivers are set up for success. Given the type of population the rescue is aiming to save, it's not unusual to lose critically ill kittens who arrive at the nursery. Such losses, 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 certain medications, specialty food and supplements, basic medical supplies and disinfectant. You'll also want some basic medical equipment: thermometers, a nebulizer, and an incubator with an oxygenator (or a small container with a heating pad). (A complete list is available at humanepro.org/saving-kittens.)



An incubator-oxygenator can cost as much as \$1,500, which might be too much for a new rescue starting out. A good substitute until you can afford the full list of supplies (available at humanepro.org/saving-kittens) 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.

If you're caring for multiple kittens, an erasable whiteboard will help you keep track of feeding and medication schedules. Daily care logs will provide a record of each kitten's progress (such as weight gain) and any concerns about diarrhea, respiratory issues, etc. This document will also serve as a helpful medical history in case a kitten needs care at a veterinary clinic or hospital.

Transferring kittens to foster care

Once the kittens 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 kittens in need, or to give the nursery volunteers a break. The number of kittens you take in shouldn't exceed the number of available spaces in your foster homes.

In the case of unweaned kittens, bottle baby kittens will be transferred to skilled bottle baby fosters. Once a bottle baby is weaned, they move to a weaned kitten foster caregiver to continue 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.

Building a foster team

In the beginning, your rescue may only have two or three foster caregivers. These will most likely be people you already know and who have experience caring for vulnerable kittens. Keep in mind that if the person overseeing the nursery is also serving as the foster coordinator, they will be the primary point of contact for questions, medical concerns, supplies and logistical support. The workload can build quickly, so start small and don't recruit more foster caregivers than they're able to manage.

When possible, seek out bottle baby caregivers who have already been trained to care for fragile neonates 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.

Your shelter partner may have staff or volunteers it can recommend to you. At NKR, we've also been successful recruiting foster caregivers from local veterinary schools and veterinary technician programs. We've found that these students are very interested in caring for animals and are quite skilled.

Existing and experienced caregivers can also become



wonderful mentors to volunteers who want to learn more specialized skills. You may want to host trainings on topics such as tube-feeding and administering subcutaneous fluids to build your volunteers' skill sets.

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 what a potential volunteer can provide and whether their skill set and available time meet our rescue's needs.

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. For example, volunteers who aren't yet ready to foster 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 can't be delivered by mail and are needed immediately; transportation volunteers can make these deliveries when the caregivers can't pick up the medications themselves.

We highly recommend that each volunteer—regardless of their role—review and sign a volunteer agreement. Before signing an agreement, potential volunteers should review all of your rescue's policies and procedures and be given the opportunity to ask questions.

Knowing what's expected is important both for you and your volunteers. It helps ensure expectations are met and provides a clear process if a volunteer is no longer a match and needs to exit the rescue. We've found that volunteers appreciate knowing exactly what's expected of them. If we must part ways, clear expectations often help make the decision mutually understood.

Before a foster caregiver receives their first kittens, you will need to train them in any areas where they have no previous training. Your bottle baby fosters should be comfortable meeting the demanding needs of feeding fragile neonates and be able to recognize warning signs when kittens aren't thriving. Bottle-feeders with a bit more veterinary experience should be able to tube-feed kittens who haven't yet latched onto a bottle and know how to administer subcutaneous fluids or vaccines. All foster caregivers must be able to administer oral and topical medications.

To guide (and train) your foster team, you should work with a veterinarian to develop kitten care protocols that provide guidance to caregivers about how to do everything from bottle-feeding to deep cleaning the kitten space. (See *kittencolalition.org* for sample protocols.)

Your foster team will benefit 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,



We recommend discussing the following with each volunteer 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're able to keep foster kittens separate from resident animals
5. Whether they're able to bring kittens to appointments
6. Whether they're willing to administer oral and topical medications
7. Whether they're willing and able to care for kittens with special conditions such as those with ringworm or who require tube-feeding or subcutaneous fluids

care protocols, and ways to address minor health concerns and recognize signs of serious illness. The manual could also contain feeding and fecal charts and a brief discussion about kitten behavior and health (e.g., suckling and kitten enrichment). It should include some sanitation guidelines to keep kittens healthy and 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.

Step 1: How to begin

Volunteers may have changes in their personal lives that impact their ability to continue, or they may need a break from caring for extremely vulnerable kittens. This is OK, and we'd rather that volunteers recognize when 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.

Establishing a tracking system

Before you take in a single kitten, you should prepare a spreadsheet or database that will help you track each animal. 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 system that allows organizations to easily upload photos of kittens, add medical data to animal records, and upload medical reports from any clinics kittens 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 record that can be provided to the shelter when kittens are returned for adoption, and the photo progressions can be used to tell stories on social media or in fundraising and grant requests.

Recruiting a veterinary 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 isn't typically taught extensively in veterinary schools. Most veterinary professionals don't 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 information on very young kitten care into the hands of the veterinary community via their resources and annual conferences, which feature speakers who are experts on various topics related to at-risk kitten care (see kittencolalition.org/programs).

NKR has found that veterinarians and veterinary technicians interested in supporting vulnerable kittens are most often 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 difficult medical cases (which they're more likely to see in a shelter). You'll have to do some research, but we've also found private practices in our communities that are willing to treat neonatal kittens. (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 new rescues, building a relationship with veterinarians at your partner shelter may be your best bet.

If you're 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 basic medications such as antibiotics and topical creams at lower-than-retail costs. Otherwise, you'll 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 weather. 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.

Starting kitten intakes

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're ready for kittens!

You're the first step in what happens next. Contact your partner shelter and let them know you're ready to intake (e.g., up to five kittens). Once a shelter reaches that threshold, ask their staff to



wait until you let them know you have the capacity to accept more kittens. This will spare you the heartache when a shelter asks you to intake more kittens than you have capacity for and you have to say no.

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 5 weeks of age or so.

Once kittens are weaned, they're moved to a weaned kitten foster, who will care for them until they're healthy and make 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 bottle baby foster to accept new kittens (after that foster caregiver has had a bit of recovery time—bottle-feeding tiny kittens is exhausting!).

Managing capacity

As you begin taking in kittens, start modestly and grow slowly, carefully and incrementally as your bandwidth allows. At first you'll want to take in every kitten the shelter may need to euthanize, whether that's 20 kittens or 200, but if your starting capacity is 10 kittens or 50, you'll 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 might 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 after first making sure the kittens truly are abandoned or orphaned. (Both you and your partner shelters can help stem the tide of neonatal kitten intakes by educating community members on what to do when they find tiny kittens outdoors. See humaneworld.org/found-kittens for sample language.)

If a shelter is unable to accept kittens brought in by a community member, it will call your rescue. Streamlining intake through a local shelter frees up time that can be focused on the kittens themselves. It's better to save 10 or 50 kittens for several years running, rather than needing to shut down the rescue due to burnout.

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're unavailable. Plan



As the public will contact you asking if you will take kittens they have found, you can set up an auto reply through your social media accounts 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.

for this and be prepared to move kittens to another volunteer or take them 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're caring for kittens, remember not to neglect the administrative duties of running your rescue. Ensure that the bills are paid, the bookkeeping is up to date and your board members are doing all they 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 can take three or four days for delivery. At NKR, 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 sources) 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're 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're able to tell a compelling story about the kittens you're 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. Most 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, your local community will be an important source for everything from donated supplies to veterinary care, so plan to develop relationships with potential supporters. For example, your local pet supply store may be 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 a wish list on an online retail site and ask your board to email the link to their networks. Launch a food drive using your social media platforms.

When you're building relationships with local veterinarians, be sure to ask about nonprofit discounts. Many clinics will offer 10% to 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 other 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, TikTok 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.

Social media can become a great source of revenue. Most platforms have tools enabling charities to solicit and receive donations. For example, you can encourage your supporters to launch "birthday fundraisers" on social media and name you as the beneficiary.

Keep track of and cultivate your donors. Send thank-you notes

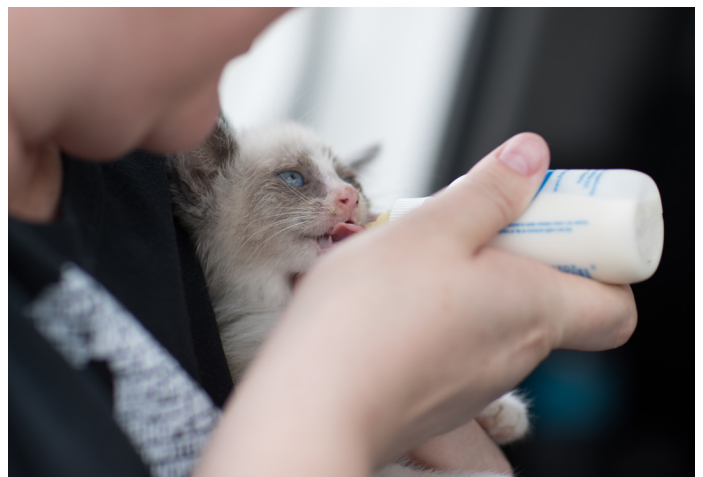
promptly, keep donors up to date on your progress and mention them on your social media platforms, checking first to make sure they're OK with being named. (As an alternative, just mention their first name.) Some metrics your donors may be interested in include: the number of kittens your rescue has taken in; how many foster caregivers you're supporting; and how many kittens 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. It's 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:

- **Responding to 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'll need to say no to new intakes if they jeopardize your ability to care for the kittens you already have. (The processes you establish with your partner shelter and your public-facing messaging can minimize how often you have to say no.)
- **Finding veterinarians** who understand feline neonatal care and are willing to provide your rescue with medical support. At NKR, we've 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 charges and getting them the supplies—and other support—they need quickly when they're 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 the entire 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 (such as delivering supplies directly to their homes, 24-7 medical support and in-home health assessments for the little ones).
- **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'll 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. 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 sanitation 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 and to more effectively manage intakes and ensure that task doesn't all fall on just one person. You may also need to contract for operational and specialty support that would otherwise be provided by you and board members. At NKR, we suspend 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 welcome more foster caregivers to your team and to take in more kittens. You will know you're ready to grow if you have established yourself in the local animal welfare community, developed a solid core of foster caregivers, demonstrated a track record of success, built a following on your social media platforms, and cultivated a reliable and growing donor base. To support growth, you'll need to build up each of these assets.

While your earlier efforts have been spent setting up and getting started, this phase shifts your energy toward ensuring that you'll be able to rescue at-risk kittens for years to come. You'll 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 and 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's time to grow.

Assessing and growing your 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 operations and financial stability of your rescue. As much as each of them contributes, it may be time to consider whether to augment 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 the work? Are there potential new members with pertinent expertise who should be invited to join the board? As you grow, you'll want to augment and eventually transition your board to a team of skilled advisers who can help you raise funds or provide other services. Consider 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 with 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 isn't 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 able to do the work needed for 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're supporting that team with the resources and energy it needs for long-term success. You'll 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 primary contact for this valued team, such as a foster coordinator who will recruit volunteers, meet with applicants, onboard new caregivers, and make 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.

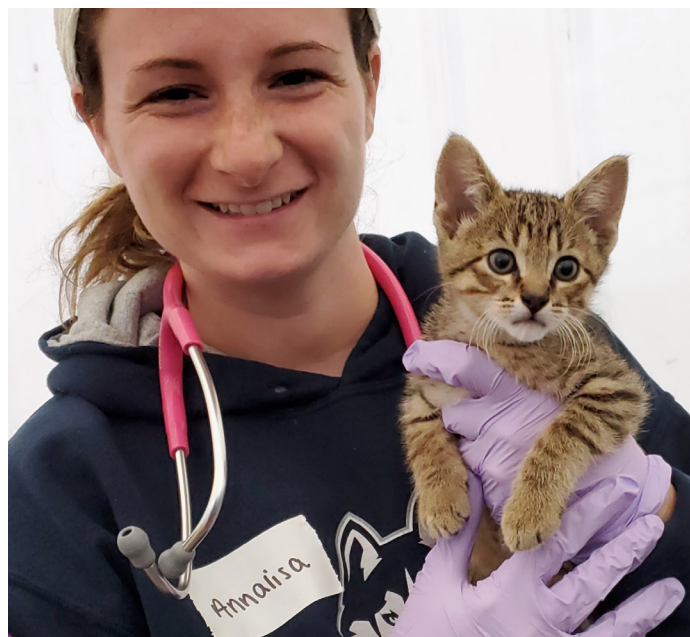
This person will also coordinate closely with the medical team lead to schedule kittens for any veterinary needs, then follow up with foster caregivers regarding any aftercare or medications. The foster coordinator will help you cultivate these relationships and make sure each caregiver knows they're valued. They will

conduct an end-of-season survey, assess the feedback, and make recommendations on your organization's policies, operations and leadership.

When recruiting new foster caregivers, ask your experienced caregivers for referrals or recommendations. Online applications are useful and can be created through most shelter software systems. Be clear and up front about 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. If you can only take on experienced foster caregivers, you may want to focus your efforts on local veterinary schools, veterinary clinics or animal shelters. (Find more tips for building your foster team on Pages 10-12.)

The foster coordinator, in consultation with the board, should plan an in-person celebration 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.

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 to individuals and to specific chat groups. We encourage organizations to implement a system that allows them to easily share photos, short videos, files and documents directly to individuals and chat groups. Examples of helpful chat groups may include bottle baby fosters, weaned kitten fosters, transport, board of directors and medical



concerns. At NKR, 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 and share experiences. NKR's private group was originally intended as a forum for nonurgent medical questions and other general communications, but it evolved into a place where caregivers offer each other encouragement and share stories and photos of the kittens in their care. 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 couldn't find dedicated, mobile on-call veterinary support during your start-up phase, you will want them now, even if you need to pay. A solid team will provide relief for individuals in the rescue who have been fielding 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 kittens' health, administer vaccinations and medications, and occasionally retrieve a kitten in need of a higher level of care.

Depending on how many kittens are in your rescue's 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. At NKR, we've had success enlisting help from students at a local veterinary school.

The medical team 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 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 or 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. At NKR, we give our foster caregivers a single number that is shared by several medical team members and used to contact us in case of an overnight emergency.

We also created a scheduling system in which 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 after-hours emergency clinic. The assigned veterinary support person may also meet them at the emergency clinic.

Note that this happens very rarely (about 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 your medical 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 a veterinarian on your team is crucial for kittens with neurological conditions or certain injuries, or kittens who aren't responding to traditional treatments as outlined in your protocols. The 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're 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 attending school. Be ready to write seasonal contracts for some of these team members and pay a reasonable stipend.

Growing your financial base

It should be no surprise that the costs associated with caring for sick, injured and underweight kittens can be unpredictable, and the care of these kittens can be expensive. A kitten 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. At NKR, we've had great success with donation appeals for special medical cases.

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's lamps. Check out a list of animal welfare grantmakers at humanepro.org/grant-listings. Also look into whether your state or county has 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

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); your reach through various social media platforms; or other 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



The 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 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 provides the supplies and specialized testing we need 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!

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 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 supporters that the funds, time and effort they invest with your rescue is paying off in lives saved.

To NKR's team, success means knowing that we gave sick, injured or 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 lives, one tiny kitten at a time.



A photograph of several kittens in a wire cage. The central kitten is a calico with large blue eyes, looking directly at the camera. To its left is an orange and white kitten, and to its right is a black, white, and orange kitten. Another kitten is visible in the background. The cage has a floral patterned backdrop.

Resources

Find these resources and more
at humanepro.org/saving-kittens:

- 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.



Our mission

Together, we tackle the root causes
of animal cruelty and suffering to
create permanent change.



**Humane
World for
Animals™**

humaneworld.org