



Shawn Warner, with his wife Stacy Unglesbee, and their charges in their Arbutus home. From left, cat Murdock, cat Edith, dog Shrimp, foster kitten Adore, dog Chloe and cat Deadpool.

STAFF PHOTOS BY JEN RYNDA

# To the rescue

## Foster families provide a bridge in pet adoptions

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Becky Sass-Crews has been considered a failure as a foster parent, at times, but she believes it to be a loving term.

As a foster parent to animals, the 32-year-old from Catonsville has decided to adopt the animal herself, rather than return it to the shelter for someone else to adopt.

“We love it when a foster [parent] fails,” Gary Klunk, a management analyst for the Baltimore County Department of Animal Services, said.

Seven of Sass-Crews’s 10 pets — seven cats and three dogs — were in a foster program when she and her family ultimately adopted them. She said she has the space and ability to care for them, with help from her husband and two daughters, ages 10 and 8.

There will often be a foster animal at the house, she said, adding there’s never a dull moment and often fulfillment. By feeding, raising and litter-box training the animals, fostering teaches her children how to be compassionate, she said.

“We would prefer to support our local animal shelters,” she said. “We’re saving

their lives and helping them provide more space within the shelter to save more animals.”

Her latest foster pet, Marshmallow, a 4-month-old domestic short hair, has a medical condition that requires ongoing treatments, but it’s likely the cat will be adopted, Sass-Crews said.

It’s kitten season in Baltimore County — the time of year when the majority of kittens are being born.

That means there’s scrambling going on in Baldwin, home of Baltimore County’s animal services department and shelter. Between four and 40 newborn kittens can arrive on a given day, in need of help and a home, Klunk said. Baltimore County opened a new \$6.6 million, 22,400 square foot animal services building in 2016.

A cat can have up to three litters in a year, Klunk said, adding the typical litter size varies from two to seven.

Traditionally, the season lasts from the spring to late summer, Klunk said. Last year, a mild winter meant the season ran to December. This year, the first litters arrived in the beginning of March.

With only about 100 spots for cats at the



A tabby and her 5-week-old kittens wait to be picked up by a foster family at Baltimore County Animal Services.

shelter, there’s not enough room to house the animals at the rate they arrive, Klunk said.

That’s where the foster parents come in.

“A lot of times, the animals in need of foster [care] are animals that would be euthanized if foster [care] was not available,” Klunk said, adding the county is trying to increase its foster parent base.



Becky Sass-Crews, of Catonsville, plays with her foster kitten, Marshmallow. Sass-Crews is an employee at the county animal services center.

A spokeswoman for the Baltimore County Department of Health and Human Services, which oversees the animal services department, said there are about 60 foster parents in the program, including employees.

Puppies and kittens can’t be adopted until they’re 8 weeks old, according to county code. The shelter relies on volunteer foster parents to nurse and socialize the pets until that time, when many become quickly adopted.

The county provides instructions, support and a kitten milk replacement for the foster parents until the kitten is old enough to return to the shelter.

“In the long run, it saves animals’ lives,” he said.

Foster parents must be county residents and able to take the animal to regular check-up visits at the shelter for no charge. Convicted animal abusers are not eligible

for the program. Applications can be approved on the same day they’re submitted, Klunk said.

In the first quarter of 2017, the release rate — the percentage of animals that leave the shelter — for cats jumped to 91.7 percent from 55.4 percent in the same quarter of 2014. The release rate for dogs in that time also increased, from 90.4 percent to 92.8 percent. Both 2017 figures are record highs.


Inga Fricke, director of pet retention programs with The Humane Society of the United States, said most shelters around the country are not required to report release rates, making it difficult to establish a national benchmark.

Foster care has been embraced nationwide, she said, adding it allows for shelters to assist more animals than they could in their physical buildings, alone, she said.

“Every shelter around the country is



Gary Klunk, of Baltimore County Animal Services, at the Baldwin shelter.

 **Video online**

Gary Klunk explains the need for foster parents for pets. Search Pet rescue at [baltimoresun.com](http://baltimoresun.com)

working for the day when no one ever has to euthanize a healthy adoptable animal anymore,” she said. “We’re all working toward programs and initiatives to make sure as many animals are placed or released live.”

In recent years, shelters have taken a “shelter neuter return” approach for community cats that are thriving, Fricke said. The best course of action for shelters may be not to take them in, where they may not be adopted, but have them neutered and returned to where they live.

Veterinarians are able to examine the cat to determine whether the animal has a good quality of life in the community it lives in, she said.

“When you take a cat that is thriving, has a stable food source and shelter, just make sure it’s not contributing to overpopulation,” she said. “That’s the best outcome for that particular cat.”

The shelter also reported that the number of animals admitted in the shelter rose from 732 in the first quarter of 2014 to 1,200 in the first quarter of 2017, an increase of nearly 60 percent.

Michelle Green, a 51-year-old from Arbutus, said she has cared for more than 300 animals since she started volunteering with the Baltimore Animal Rescue and Care Shelter, a Baltimore City-based nonprofit, five years ago.

A saleswoman for a moving company, she spends 60 percent to 70 percent of her working hours at home, which allows her to keep an eye on her fosters, along with her 14 other pets — two dogs and a dozen cats.

That includes taking care of what’s known as “bottle babies,” newborn kittens that require to be fed every two hours. As

they get older, they are required to be fed less frequently.

She converted a spare bedroom into a foster room and can have up to four litters at a time, in addition to her 12 cats and two dogs.

She’s often asked how and why she fosters animals — while the typical foster may take care of 15 animals per year, she does about 70. She said she can sum it up in two brief points.

“I can and they need it,” she said.

After watching pet after pet grow up, she’s often asked how she can let them go.

“I can’t keep 300 animals, but I can make someone else happy,” she said. “The joy that I bring to other people far outweighs the overwhelmingness I may get.”

Green said she spends \$5,000 to \$8,000 on food and supplies per year for her foster animals. She started a second business selling leggings online to cover some of the costs.

Stacy Unglesbee and her husband, Shawn Warner, have been fostering animals for about six years at their Arbutus home. When they adopted a cat at BARCS, they were sad to see all the cats at the shelter in need of care.

From then, they signed up to take pets into their home. Their two sons, ages 28 and 16 also help.

“It’s really sad when an animal has to lose their life simply because there’s no room in the shelter and they’re perfectly healthy,” she said.

Unglesbee and Warner said they typically bring in animals that are unlikely to be adopted, such as ones with medical conditions.

“We would rather open our hearts, wallets and homes to these animals who have nowhere else to go,” she said. “If someone doesn’t foster them, they’ll die.”

“Some people are superficial about adopting animals. They only want the cute ones,” Warner added. “The ones who are misfits could linger in the shelter, or be euthanized because they weren’t the cutest ones at the party and that’s not really fair.”