

## No More Homeless Pets Forum

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**Topic: Breed Rescue**



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For almost every breed, there are rescuers who focus on helping pets of that particular persuasion. Jonathan Gibson of Golden Bond Rescue helps us identify, work with or start a reputable breed rescue organization.

### **Introduction from Jonathan Gibson**

I would like to share the experiences we have had as a golden retriever rescue organization with anyone interested in building a rescue organization in their geographic area. Our present group, Golden Bond Rescue ([www.goldenbondrescue.com](http://www.goldenbondrescue.com)), has been organized for just over five years and has more than 100 active volunteers in the Oregon and southwest Washington region, with some volunteers in the Seattle and Puget Sound area. We have several types of fundraising activities, including pet fairs, an annual volunteer picnic with a silent auction, grant writing, a calendar, merchandise sales, a Christmas letter and adoption fees.

We have several people who are experienced in building working relationships with the local humane societies and shelters. One of our specialties is the rehabilitation of injured goldens or golden mixes or goldens needing surgery due to hip dysplasia or bad knees, which sometimes requires special fundraising efforts.

The Foster Home Team and the foster homes that receive incoming goldens are the core of the organization. We would be glad to share our experiences, and learn from yours, about how to improve the foster home experience for all involved. The most rewarding part of the process is the matching of goldens to new homes, which our Adoption Team does with consistent success. With the help of some of our volunteers, I am willing to answer questions about any part of our rescue organization.

### **Bio for Jonathan Gibson**

About four years ago, Jonathan retired from a 25-year career as an engineer for a technology company and became involved in Golden Bond Rescue of Oregon. He and his wife, Jessica, first became adopters of a series of goldens. They now have three: age 3 (high energy, but also a therapy golden), age 4 (a golden with a bilateral pelvic osteotomy) and age 11 (a special-needs sweetheart of a golden).

Jonathan and Jessica then became a foster family (they currently have a 20-month-old male golden mix at home) and also volunteered to do the initial screening of adoption and foster applications. In a little over two and a half years, they have processed about 820 applications and participated in 500 adoptions, along with producing the 2006 Golden Bond calendar for fundraising, volunteering for special events, fostering, doing home visits and dog evaluations, and supporting the annual volunteer appreciation picnic. Jessica and Jonathan have helped in the process of finding wonderful homes for many deserving goldens and making many families very happy.

In January 2005, Jonathan became the president of the Golden Bond Rescue Board of Directors, a position that is shared as much as possible with Jessica. Goals for the future of Golden Bond Rescue include rescuing even more goldens and improving the volunteer experience of the more than 100 people in Washington and Oregon who participate in Golden Bond rescue activities.

## Finding foster homes

**Question from Jane:** My husband and I started a breed-specific rescue for great Pyrenees about three years ago. Since then we have re-homed about 150 pyrs. We have since started a Great Pyrenees Club from our adopter base, and other people we find who have pyrs too, and have about five events per year.

We have had some success in getting members of the club to foster, but usually can only count on less than three as consistent fosters. I also run ads in the newspaper about two times per month, and always include "Fosters needed!" at the end of the ads. I'd be interested in learning more about how to get people more interested in fostering so we can save more dogs.

**Response from Jonathan Gibson:** It's no secret to you, no doubt, that fostering is the most labor-intensive part of rescue activity. A foster family is on duty every day and some nights, for days or weeks and sometimes months for just one dog.

Success in attracting and keeping foster homes depends to a large extent on defining the limits of the fostering obligation. People will usually avoid unlimited commitments. Golden Bond Rescue has evolved a division of labor for the fostering process where one volunteer is dedicated to maintaining a detailed spreadsheet describing each foster family, how to reach them (address, phone, e-mail, fax), and a description of each family's preference for fostering, such as whether any dog can be handled, or no puppies, seniors only, no health issues, special needs or not, etc. The experience of each foster family is also described and whether they can or want to handle behavioral issues, training or socialization or surgery rehabilitations. The pet inventory of each foster family is included, as is the name of another experienced foster who acts as a mentor for new foster families.

The Master Foster List is maintained daily, as new foster families are steadily being added, due to an increasing number of goldens being brought into the rescue, and to make sure that the status of the nearly 70 regular foster families and the 30 or so emergency or respite foster families, who provide vacation or weekend relief for foster families, is up to date. Since not all the families on the Master Foster List are always available, we begin to have difficulty placing goldens in foster care when the number reaches about 45. The Foster Team is very dependent upon the accuracy of the Master Foster List to make their jobs as easy as possible.

The rest of our Foster Team consists of two leaders and two or three members who are on call for a week in a rotation, as the intake of goldens into the rescue can be very high one week and low the next, which can be very demanding, especially if the goldens are of the not-very-easy-to-place variety. If the number of Foster Team members, who do the work involved in placing goldens in particular foster homes, drops to four, then we start every kind of advertising we can afford to increase the size of the Foster Team.

Having a good geographical spread of the Foster Team members is also very important, as it is easier to know foster families that are not too far away. We have placed 166 goldens so far this year, with two months to go.

A rescue group has to decide how to support the foster families financially. Some families absorb the cost of fostering, but occasionally some support from the rescue is required in terms of medicine, veterinary assistance, or special foods.

When the adoption process starts for a golden, the adoption coordinator initiates the process, facilitating the negotiation of visits between the potential adopter and the foster family, the happiest part of the rescue process.

We also have an annual picnic in the summer for volunteer recognition and an annual volunteer meeting in the winter, both of which bring as much attention to increasing the foster family pool as possible.

We attend pet appreciation days in the area and fill a booth at the Portland Pet Expo (attended by about 10,000 visitors) with goldens and volunteers, and have foster family interest forms available, along with all of our other literature.

We also organize a Photo with Santa opportunity at a local vendor, which is a doggie wash this year.

We have occasionally advertised through the Oregonian newspaper, [www.craigslist.com](http://www.craigslist.com), [www.petfinder.com](http://www.petfinder.com), many veterinarian offices, shelters, our website ([www.goldenbondrescue.com](http://www.goldenbondrescue.com)) and have a photo contest for adopted goldens for the annual Golden Bond calendar, available through our website.

Many people become interested in fostering after reading the very entertaining success stories of adoptions, also on our website. Our newsletter also includes a “Foster Corner” in each quarterly issue, to help inform families of the many rewards of fostering. The newsletter will gradually be placed in more vet offices and pet supply stores, which should help Golden Bond Rescue find more foster families.

## Lookie loos and breed snobs

**Question from Tony:** Sometimes with purebreds our rescue gets lookie loos. That's what I call people who are attracted to the appearance or glamour of a specific breed, or their doctor told them that a certain breed is hypoallergenic. (I've heard about so many different breeds being “the one” that's hypoallergenic that I'm extremely skeptical.) Or someone they admire, such as an acquaintance or a movie character, has that breed of pet. Anyway, I'm wondering how you tell if a potential adopter is just starstruck by a pedigree, or is actually interested in the animal for his or her individual personality?

**Response from Jonathan Gibson:** One of the questions in our adoption application asks if a mix will be acceptable. Most of the time, the answer is yes, but occasionally, people say no, mostly due to the fact that they want a dog that looks and acts like a golden, we believe. The mixes that clearly look like goldens are generally easier to adopt. A surprising number of goldens that come into the rescue do have AKC papers, but I don't remember a case where an adoption depended on such documentation.

Our policy is that all goldens entering the rescue are spayed or neutered immediately without exception, which takes the breeding aspect out of consideration. Some people prefer mixes because of the belief that mixes have fewer allergy and disease problems, but who knows for sure? We also have a list of attributes that people can choose from when filling out the application form, and appearance is one of them. This kind of information helps the adoption coordinator make a more informed match with such an applicant. Protection is another attribute people can choose to describe the dog they want, but goldens, of course, are too susceptible to a treat to be fierce defenders for very long.

It takes more time to determine if a family is really interested in a specific golden for the right reasons. We ask the foster families to write a short description of their foster golden when the foster is judged to be ready for adoption, which is then posted on our website. The foster family knows the most about the foster dog and has the final approval of an adoption. What the potential adopters say they want needs to match well with the characteristics of the foster. For example, families with very young children will often request a young golden so that it will grow up with the family and be around for many years. Our method of making sure that the family really can handle a young golden is to bring one or more young goldens on a home visit, to see how the parents and children react.

Many times, an 11-year-old ends up being the kind of golden that was really wanted, in terms of calmness and overall energy level. If possible, a long walk or two in a number of situations can bring out a lot of information about both an adopter and the foster. We also have a policy that an applicant family needs to view and make a decision about one golden at a time, even though there is often a desire to shop around until the “best fit” is identified. Our adoption application is available online at [www.goldenbondrescue.com](http://www.goldenbondrescue.com). The home visit, where a volunteer visits the applicant’s home, is where the best understanding of what kind of golden will be the most suitable is achieved. We get to see any existing pets, the limitations of the yard, any hazards on or surrounding the property, and can generally see how the golden may be treated in the applicant’s home, and usually learn something that wasn’t covered in the application.

There are certain key phrases that we like to see in an application that indicate how an adopted golden is likely to be treated. If there are words like “treated like a member of the family” and “will have the run of the house” and “will be inside when alone,” then we know we have a family that will treat a golden properly. Goldens do not like to be alone for long periods and would rather be lying at your feet or going with you in the car. The best situation is when there is almost always someone home.

## Who gets accepted into specific breed rescue?

**Question from Jesse:** How do you decide which dogs to take into your program? Is demand greater than the number of foster homes available? And how do you decide if a dog has enough golden retriever to be considered a mix?

In order to maintain a good selection of dogs, it would seem that there would need to be more dogs than adopters available. Is that true? And if so, what is the average length of time that a dog stays in foster?

**Response from Jonathan Gibson:** We try to accept all goldens in our usual geographic area, which is all of Oregon and southwest Washington, into our rescue group. We will try to help in virtually any case where we can make a difference to the dog.

Our intake coordinators have worked closely with many of the shelters in our region to make sure that the shelters understand what we have to offer. This helps our organization greatly, as we generally receive a fair percentage of our goldens from shelters, and not just the difficult-to-adopt variety.

The process of acceptance is slower for goldens that need extensive surgery or other expensive veterinary care, since funds must be made available to support such goldens by some means. We handle about three or four major rehabilitation projects per year, involving knee or hip or other reconstructions, which can cost about \$3,000 per surgery. Grant writers are kept busy and fundraisers are frequent.

We have no age limits for the intake of goldens nor any specific health issue limitations, as long as we know in advance what problems exist. It is harder to accept dogs with dog or people aggression issues, though we are making progress in that area this year. If the former family of a golden is not in a hurry to surrender the dog, then the process is easier and can take more time and this generally works better for all involved. If the golden must be taken immediately for some reason, then we will find an emergency foster home that is most likely capable of handling that golden, but the stress is much higher and overuse of some foster homes can result.

This year, there seems to be more goldens coming into the rescue, as we are constantly running out of foster homes, even though we sign up three to five new foster families per month. We lose some foster families because they adopt the foster (which my wife and I have personally done three times!). We maintain a Master Foster List of nearly 100 families, about half of which are actively fostering at any point in time.

We have accepted dogs that are as little as 10 percent golden, which is kind of a rescue group way of saying not very golden. One big mix, known as Mr. Bones due to his emaciated condition, was accepted. He needed stomach and bowel surgery to save his life, due to swallowing parts of a plastic toy. He has turned into a real treasure for his new family.

Some mixes are more difficult to adopt than others, due to behavioral differences compared to "regular" goldens. Again, we will consider virtually any rescue situation, but goldens are preferred, since our foster families are more used to working with the golden personality and requirements.

Our golden inventory changes with time, as we just accept what comes along. Sometimes there are more seniors and youngsters, and other times we have an overload of puppies. We process applications from about 350 families per year and last year we placed 188 goldens. So far in 2005, we have placed 166 goldens, with two months to go. Many applicants are trying every rescue and shelter they can find and even breeders to find the golden that they want, so the cancellations are fairly high. We adjusted our application fee higher to try to slow down the canceled applications, but a \$25 non-refundable application fee isn't high enough to prevent some cancellations due

to getting a dog elsewhere. It isn't common for our rescue to have more foster dogs than applicants on file. We generally have about 50% more applicants than we have dogs available, so not everyone ends up with a golden or it takes quite a while for some families to get the type of golden that they want.

A foster golden stays with his or her foster family until it is determined by the foster family to be ready for adoption. Sometimes, for exceptional goldens from good situations, the foster period can be a few days, but we prefer a minimum of a couple of weeks, since it takes a while for dogs to relax and become their regular selves in a new environment. A foster golden needs to have their character well known in order to have a chance of being placed with an adoptive family that is the right fit for all involved. Younger goldens are generally fostered longer than seniors, as the seniors have long since learned the rules of living with humans. Goldens with behavioral, medical or training issues are also generally in foster care longer.

Aggression or high prey drive can cause very long foster care stays. On the average, foster stays are probably about four weeks for normal, healthy goldens. If the foster stay is too short, there is the possibility of missing a health issue, which has happened to us a few times this year, where serious illnesses have surfaced not much more than a month after adoption. But no process is perfect and we do the best that we can. There are so many good adoptions and happy families that we can usually deal with the occasional setback without too much difficulty.

## Working with breeders

**Question from Trina:** I know this is a sticky issue, but how does your group relate with golden retriever breeders? I know many specific breed rescues where the founders either used to breed dogs, or still continue to breed dogs. Or rescuers that get their dogs at least in part from breeders ("Bessie would have been 'culled' as a puppy because of her birth defects or non-standard coloring, but we took her instead..."). How does Golden Bond feel about this? Do you interact with breeders at all and, if so, in what way?

**Response from Jonathan Gibson:** We don't interact all that much with breeders, though we have been tempted to have a list of breeders in the area who are known to produce goldens that are prone to hip dysplasia and other issues that are very expensive to correct. One of our personal goldens, who is four now, had bilateral pelvic osteotomies due to severe lameness at six months of age from hip dysplasia. He is only one of three goldens from the same breeder that Golden Bond has rehabilitated in the past few years at rather considerable cost and certainly plenty of trauma for the goldens. Our four-year-old golden can run as hard as the others, occasionally, but faces a hip replacement in probably a year or so.

The problem with talking to breeders about such issues is that it is so hard to prove, due to various growth processes associated with the maturing of a golden. Just feeding a golden puppy food for too long may cause the excessive growth of pelvic bone that leads to dysplasia. There are many other factors that are likely involved, well beyond my level of understanding.

If breeders would have their puppies' hips evaluated at about 5 to 6 weeks of age for the potential of developing hip dysplasia, there is the possibility of utilizing a minimally

invasive procedure to correct the hip socket misalignment before the puppies' bones have fully matured. This is a somewhat controversial procedure and success probably depends on having someone available who is very experienced at evaluating puppies for hip issues.

There shouldn't be any problem with adopting a puppy that is not up to a breeder's normal standards if the puppy is neutered or spayed as soon as possible (which can be as early as about 6 to 8 weeks of age) as long as the puppy is likely to live a relatively normal, healthy life. We don't seem to have any volunteers who are active breeders, though there are probably a few that have had a litter of pups some time in the past.

We treat mixes the same as goldens with full pedigrees, in terms of incoming care, foster care and the adoption process. The adoption fees are set on the basis of age and health.

### Which should be our next step for growth?

**Question from Jane:** We had one dog this year that we did a fundraiser for to pay for a torn ACL – by just e-mailing our support base. We also have partnered with a mixed breed 501(c)3, so we can get the benefit of letting folks donate to a tax-free group and let their donations be tax-deductible. I'd be interested in learning more about the pros, cons and limitations of becoming a nonprofit. What should our next step be to grow the rescue, and how big do you need to be before becoming incorporated as a nonprofit?

**Response from Jonathan Gibson:** I don't really know of any financial reasons to not become a 501(c)3 organization, other than the initial filing costs and the overhead of creating a set of bylaws and all of the other support documentation needed to start your rescue activities, which can be mostly borrowed and adapted from a number of existing rescue groups, including Golden Bond Rescue. Probably the most important thing is to decide what your mission will be and to make sure you have a core group of five to eight people that are really committed to staying with the organization for at least a few years.

Once you have people identified for the core tasks, such as a board of directors to organize the rescue, an intake coordinator (accepts dogs into the rescue from shelters and the public), a foster team (places dogs into foster homes for evaluation, continuing veterinary support and possibly some training), and an adoption team (processes applications and matches applicants to foster dogs), with sufficient depth of people for each task to minimize the chance of volunteer burnout, then you are ready to go!

Golden Bond Rescue probably started out handling maybe 5 to 10 goldens per month and now is approaching 20 goldens per month, just for Oregon and southwest Washington. The leaders for the three teams – intake, foster and adoption – are very key positions and should either be very dog-experienced or rescue-experienced. The intake position is critical, as this person needs to establish the rescue group with all of the shelters in the region, so that the shelters will call when they have your breed available. As you grow, you will need a person to handle all of the e-mails and another person to handle all of the postal mail.

To get exposure for your rescue group, a website is probably the least expensive and most effective way to show the purpose and accomplishments of your group. We have

gradually added features to our website ([www.goldenbondrescue.com](http://www.goldenbondrescue.com)) as the need has developed and when we have the people with the skills and time to build and maintain the website. We have a web-based photo contest, voted on by volunteers and adopters, to select photos for the annual Golden Bond calendar.

We also participate in pet appreciation days in our area, fill a large booth at the Portland Pet Expo with lots of goldens and volunteers, and publish a quarterly newsletter that highlights significant volunteer contributions, spotlights special goldens and their stories, and brings attention to ongoing needs of the rescue, such as new foster homes.

Late each summer, we organize a Volunteer Recognition Picnic, a potluck affair, where we all get together with our goldens and enjoy an afternoon, with awards going to outstanding contributors, along with a silent auction and merchandise sales for fundraising, a Senior Parade and a Foster Parade, which is a great time for adoption applicants to see a lot of goldens in one place.

We also have developed a line of Golden Bond merchandise, including hats, t-shirts, sweatshirts, bandanas and a few other items that give us an opportunity to raise some funds at the various events we attend. You will need a few people who are experienced grant writers. We also generate a Christmas letter that highlights the year's rescue activities and successes, which is always a good fundraising opportunity. We maintain several spreadsheets, including a Master List of all families that have come in contact with our rescue, a Volunteer List of all families that are doing volunteer work or have expressed the desire to volunteer at some point, a Master Foster List defining the abilities of our foster families, along with many other lists associated with foster and adoption activity.

Needless to say, it is best to start fairly small, build expertise in each of the main rescue areas and slowly bring in more dogs and also more people, trying to keep the workload balanced for everyone as much as possible. Our board of directors meets every other month, and the meeting location moves around our geographical area, to spread the effort of traveling somewhat. Please take a look at the categories that are supported on our website. The "Goldens Available" and "Success Stories" are very popular pages that many people check nearly daily to see what has happened relative to the foster goldens.

## How much input should foster parents have?

**Question from Sheila:** How much input do your foster families have as far as matching their foster dog with a potential adopter? Does your group use a matching system to help find the right dog/pup for a particular adopter and vice versa?

Our group has the foster family list 7-10 items each foster dog is seeking in their dream home. Our personal contacts (the volunteer processing a potential adopter's application) list 7-10 qualities their potential adopter is looking for in a canine companion and what they can provide. We use these lists as a cross reference to help find possible matches. Is this the best way to do things?

**Response from Jonathan Gibson:** Our foster families have the final approval of an adopter of their foster golden, as the foster family usually knows their foster dog best. However, let's start at the beginning of the process, with the submission of an adoption

application by a prospective adopting family. Our adoption application (which evolved from an application created by RAGofAZ, I believe), available on our website, is eight pages long and is considered bureaucratic overload by some applicants, but it really just starts to identify the information needed to make a successful adoption. Adoption Team members review the application for completeness and call the applicants if clarification of responses is needed. A letter is generally sent to families with young children less than about six years old, indicating that only certain kinds of golden retrievers (no strays, no aggressive dogs, no prey drive issues, etc.) will be considered for families with young children, regardless of the dog experience of the family.

The next important part of making a match between a foster dog and an adoptive family is the home visit. One of our volunteers goes to the home of each applicant and fills out a four-page form that attempts to identify the important features of the home and the abilities of the family to assimilate a big dog into their home. It gets another person involved in the process of understanding an applicant family and generally provides us with evidence to support the information in the adoption application or gives us the chance to more accurately understand the desires of the adopting family.

The adoption coordinator uses all the information in the adoption application, the home visit report, and any letters from the applicant, photos and other communications to try to make a suitable match with an adopting family. The adoption coordinator facilitates visits between the potential adopter and the foster family. The adopter and foster family meet one or more times to make sure that a good fit for the golden is possible.

We also encourage an applicant family to view only one foster golden at a time and make a decision about that golden before seeing another foster golden. The reasons for this limitation include minimizing "shopping around," which is very time-consuming and difficult for foster families, partly because the adoption process is very emotional for most people and also because of the widely varying geographic locations of foster golden retrievers and adopting families.

We don't necessarily make adoptions in the order that the applications are received, but try to make the best matches based on the information that we have. Some families are more difficult to find a match for, due to specific requests for a certain type of golden retriever, long working hours or some unique issues with their house or property. For example, we prefer to place foster golden retrievers in homes with secure fences or kennels, especially in urban areas. But if there is clear evidence that the adopting family knows how to safely manage a new adoptee, then we will consider placing a golden retriever in a home without a secure fence. We also identify families that are either minimally dog-experienced or have young children or some other special situation and provide the family with a mentor, who is generally a volunteer who has been involved in Golden Bond Rescue long enough to know most of our rules and procedures.

All of the above support activities are intended to help the adoption be successful and to maintain communication with the adopting family for the first year or so after the adoption. The mentor is also responsible for making sure the adopting family completes training for all the members of the family and the golden retriever, which is especially important for families with children.

We will probably complete about 200 golden retriever adoptions this year, about 10% more than last year. We now have two intake coordinators, four people on the Adoption Team,

seven and sometimes eight people on the Foster Home Team and about 70 regular foster homes and about 30 emergency or respite foster homes, with about half of the foster homes actively fostering at any single point in time. All of these people are kept very busy handling the 17 to 20 golden retrievers per month that we have in the rescue. Please refer to our newsletter, which is available online at [www.goldenbondrescue.com](http://www.goldenbondrescue.com) to see the full list of organizing volunteers.

## Making a Foster Corner work for you

**Question from Barbara:** I manage the Pet Foster Network ([www.petfoster.org](http://www.petfoster.org)), which helps 19 animal rescue groups and shelters in North Carolina to recruit as many foster parents as possible by promoting the joys of pet fostering. I was wondering about your Foster Corner in your newsletter. What exactly do you ask your foster homes to write about? I would like to do the same.

**Response from Jonathan Gibson:** We started including the Foster Corner to make it easier for Foster Team members to tell their stories and to try and inspire more families to become foster families. Each person can write anything they want to achieve that goal. Personal experiences seem to do the best and are sometimes almost unbelievable and certainly entertaining.

The people who do the foster home coordinating are the first to understand when we are short of foster homes. The foster home coordinators have to learn how to talk families into accepting a foster, perhaps assuming some of the expense and providing the time to treat the foster appropriately, providing training or socialization or trips to the vet as needed. So, our approach for the Foster Corner is more goal-oriented and not so much defining the content.

So far, our newsletter is distributed some by e-mail and mostly through the website, but eventually, we will get more of the newsletters placed in veterinary offices, day cares, therapy and rehabilitation centers and, eventually, pet supply stores.

Another goal of the Foster Corner is to define just what fostering a golden retriever is like and what it requires of a family. The more ways you describe the fostering task, the easier it is for potential foster families to understand what we are doing and what the dogs need. We also have a Foster Home Manual that we provide to new foster families that is about 40 pages long. This manual has been leveraged from other rescue group foster manuals. Hope this helps!

## How strict should our adoption policies be?

**Question from Traci:** Can you please talk more about your adoption policies? We're struggling with how strict we should be. On one hand, we want to find truly loving, permanent homes. On the other hand, there are so many animals needing another chance ... maybe the people need another chance as well.

For example, we currently reject any potential adopter who's ever given up an animal in the past (for just about any reason), or has an intact animal at home, or breeds animals, or would let their new pet free roam outside, or doesn't want to tell their landlord about the adoption. How do you and your organization feel about all this? We struggle with

how much leeway to give adopters.

**Response from Jonathan Gibson:** I'm the person who gets to write the rejection letters, and I really don't like to reject applicants, unless there is no chance of finding a way for an adoption to be very successful. Our reject rate for applicants is about 1 or 2 percent per year for the 300+ applications we receive each year, which is probably low for a rescue group.

My wife and I assumed the adoption and foster application processing about three years ago and we were given a file of about 30 types of reject letters that were occasionally used. I believe we have only used about two or three of those file letters. If there isn't a landlord letter with the application, the rejection is easy, no questions asked, but we don't get many applications from renters (maybe four per year).

Rejections usually occur when there are a number of reasons that an applicant doesn't meet our adoption criteria. Some combination of minimal dog experience, young family with very young children (especially if they want a puppy or very young dog), long working hours, no fence in an urban situation usually causes us to spend more time with an applicant to understand how they are going to take care of the dog. The parents must be the main caretakers, but children can share some of the responsibilities. Both parents must be enthusiastic about an adoption. We require both spouses to sign the application, which has uncovered some lack of agreement in a few cases. The most time-consuming adopters are the ones with little or no dog experience, which isn't all that common, but does occur.

We have had a few adopters who breezed through the adoption process, then let us know that they didn't realize that they would have to be dog trainers. Such people just want a perfect dog, whatever that is, who stays that way. We interpret that to mean that the adopter doesn't have the time or energy to make the adopted dog a part of the family and do the things necessary, such as training. For family and dog, training makes every day go relatively smoothly with no difficult challenges to deal with.

If there is some response in the application that is unclear, contrary to our principles, or incomplete, we give the applicant a call to get more information. This is very time-consuming, but generally helps applications move through the approval process successfully. You get a much better impression of the applicant's real interest and some indication of their dog-handling ability. We are always wary of the application that says all of the things we should hear. If it is impossible to win the phone-tag game, then the family probably is too busy to deal with a dog.

Whatever the applicant says about the fencing of the yard is verified in the home visit report, where a Golden Bond volunteer visits the house at a time when all members of the family are home. If a questionable application is being processed, we send a volunteer who is experienced in evaluating the issues that need to be understood, such as the ability of young children to deal with a big dog, partial or no fencing, and hazards on or around the property.

There have been a number of applications where we might reject the applicant based on the application alone, but after talking with them on the phone and after the home visit, you find that a dog probably will have a good life in that home. Some people have no problem filling out a long application with great detail and others use as few words as

possible, or none at all, for some responses. We discourage the use of invisible fences, since it isn't possible to prevent other dogs or wild animals from entering the protected area, among other concerns. However, if an applicant says they have used an invisible fence successfully in their area and are experienced in training their adopted dog with such a fence, then we have made exceptions.

It all depends upon the experience and skill of the applicant family. We often have applicants that probably know more about goldens than we do and those are the people we are all trying to find. The problems come occasionally from people who think they know more than we do about goldens.

If a child is listed as the primary caretaker, that is an automatic phone call, since children are generally loaded up with all kinds of educational and sport activities and sometimes are not able to provide the attention needed for the dog. But there are exceptions, mostly with families that have already had a dog.

We would rather not adopt into a family with an intact dog, but it depends upon the reason, and we don't remember an application from anyone who is a breeder of goldens (other breeds, yes). A few applicants have had a litter some time in the past.

There are not too many adoptions that fail for us and only for a few different kinds of reasons. The highest risk adoption is to young families with very young children, as mentioned above, if the family wants to adopt a young golden. The most popular request by potential adopters is "a dog that is as young as possible, but no longer a puppy." We try to talk people with young children into considering a golden who is more like four to six years old.

The issue for adopters is how long the dog is going to be around, so a younger dog should be around correspondingly longer. But if the parents don't have the time or energy to exercise that one-year-old former puppy, then almost anything in the house is at risk. The problems usually take a few months to reach the intolerable point.

We have started a mentor program for families that have some kind of high risk factor. We assign an experienced volunteer to keep communication going with the family until all parties have learned how to make the adoption work. The mentor program is not all that time-consuming and can be very effective. Everyone always says that they will take some training classes with their new adoptee, and the families that actually do so have an easy time with their dog.

The people who are too busy to take any kind of training often never really connect with the dog, which can result in behavioral problems. We feel that the humans in the family, in many cases, need the training more than the pet, since the family needs to learn how to communicate with the dog, at least for basic control and safety.

The next most likely reason an adoption fails is long working hours. We do adopt to people with long working hours, as long as they have someone who can help during the adaptation period, such as a neighbor who can let the dog out at noon.

We have had people not disclose certain situations in their family, such as autism or some type of handicap. While problems are not a certainty, the odds for some kind of difficulty do increase.

It probably is a good policy to have the people that approve the applications be the ones who write the rejections. It closes the loop well and the person who approved the application doesn't have to learn too much more to write a rejection, plus the pain of writing a rejection will help sharpen the evaluation of future applications.

Emotions are very high for most people when they are adopting and all of the volunteers involved need to help the adopting family realize their good intentions, especially when there are children in the family. Also, if you have good, experienced people in the main rescue group positions, find backups for them and train more than one person to do each job so that it isn't a crisis every time a volunteer has to move on.

## What's in a foster home manual?

**Question from Gena:** I am the coordinator and president for PROS Pug Rescue in California. I've found that keeping foster homes is the hardest part and can limit the number of pugs we bring in. Of course, I have foster homes that go above and beyond and I try to acknowledge them as much as possible.

I've been wanting to put together a foster manual and have looked for ideas but for some reason the rescue groups who do have foster manuals haven't been forthcoming with any helpful information on what to include in them. Can you give me any help in what should be included in a foster manual?

**Response from Jonathan Gibson:** I'll bring the subject of making our Foster Home Manual available online up at our next board meeting in a week and a half. After that time, please send an e-mail to this forum moderator at [nmhpforum@bestfriends.org](mailto:nmhpforum@bestfriends.org) to see if we can send you an electronic version. Our agreement with RAGofAZ requires that new users of this material acknowledge the significant contribution of RAGofAZ and we would appreciate the mention of Golden Bond Rescue, as we have added a number of our own documents and policy descriptions.

The following is an abstract of the contents to let you know what we consider important information for a foster home manual.

We distribute a "fast facts" single sheet, printed on both sides, plastic covered, with the most important information relative to introducing a foster dog into a new foster home. One side contains all the common-sense handling information and the other side lists the names, phone numbers and e-mail addresses of all the volunteers that the foster family might need to contact. This keeps all-important information easily available and easy to post on the kitchen bulletin board.

We answer eight important questions that foster families generally ask sooner or later:

1. How long does the dog stay in foster care?
2. What if I can't keep the dog any longer?
3. What if we want to travel?
4. May I adopt my foster dog (known as being a "foster failure")?
5. May I choose which dogs I foster?

6. How much time does fostering take?
7. Will I become attached to the dog?
8. How much does it cost to foster a dog?

We provide a four-page description of our General Fostering Guidelines, which define the basic rules of fostering, and follow with a discussion of how to introduce a foster dog to your family. Caring for your foster dog includes information on how to identify your foster, where your foster should stay, how to deal with chewing problems, watering, feeding, exercise, health issues, health care and weight management, and grooming. We also cover many aspects of training and how to deal with many types of behavior, including generally accepted methods of discipline.

Another section covers the adoption process, including the adoption interview, how to turn down an adopter, making the adoption and follow-up after the adoption. Appendix A lists the participating veterinarians in the area. Appendix B contains a copy of the Foster Home Agreement, important information for new adopters (adopter's copy), important information for new adopters (Foster Team copy), and the Adoption Release and Indemnity Agreement.

Appendix C contains supplemental articles:

1. Let's Prevent Lost Dogs!
2. Shelter Dog Transition
3. Separation Anxiety
4. The "Trade" (getting something you want away from the dog)
5. House Training an Adult Dog
6. List of Poisonous/Toxic and Non-Toxic Plants
7. Safe Over-the-Counter Drug / Vitamin / Supplement List
8. Suggested Reading List

Plus, we supply a link to the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), which has an excellent website containing many useful articles on dog behavior. Their website is: [www.hsus.org/pets/pet\\_care/our\\_pets\\_for\\_life\\_program/dog\\_behavior\\_tip\\_sheets](http://www.hsus.org/pets/pet_care/our_pets_for_life_program/dog_behavior_tip_sheets).

## Relatively painless rejection letters

**Question from Sandi:** We are an exotic bird rescue looking for some examples of rejection letters to adoption applications. We have had many hostile responses upon denial of an application and would like to minimize this if possible. Can you please provide a few examples?

**Response from Jonathan Gibson:** I mentioned earlier that rejection letters are one of the hardest things to do as a rescue volunteer. It's usually no fun to be a part of dissension and to cause people to be upset or angry. However, rejections are part of the business of rescue, as not every family is a viable candidate for the adoption or fostering of a rescued animal. To just supply some examples of rejection letters really isn't starting at the beginning of the process. Using all the information you have relative to the

applicant usually shows how to do a rejection, if necessary.

One way to minimize the hostile responses is to use every tactic possible to convince the rejected applicant that now isn't the right time for them to adopt or foster. A good strong application form that requires some real commitment of time by the applicant will filter out most lazy people and the ones that just can't deal with bureaucratic paperwork. If the application isn't filled out properly or we don't agree with some of the responses, a phone call to the applicant is the second way to learn more about their experience and skills in handling animals. We only reject about 2 or 3 percent of our applicants (out of 300+) each year at this stage – although many “fall out of the game” on their own.

The next step is a home visit, where a Golden Bond volunteer goes to the applicant's home, when all the family is present, and checks that the information in the application is correct, that there are no misrepresentations and that the yard and fence are as claimed, along with there being no unmentioned hazards on or around the house and property. The home visit is especially important if the application has some weaknesses or problem areas that need to be understood better.

Many times, we learn new information in the home visit that wasn't mentioned in the application. If a rejection is likely or if it is difficult to decide about a rejection, the Adoption Team can be polled to make sure more than one person agrees with the rejection. At that point, most of the time, it's just a matter of what to say in the rejection letter and having more than one person involved in choosing the words helps a great deal.

If there is someone in your group who could sell ice to Eskimos, such a person might have an easier time finding the words for a rejection. It should be clear from the adoption or foster application, the phone calls and the home visit what the deficiencies are that cause a rejection. But you don't always need to call out all of the deficiencies in your rejection letter. For example, one applicant whose home didn't fare well during a home visit, due to not being at all clean, also didn't tell us that a puppy had just come into the home. So rather than reject the person because of a messy house, we recommended that the person wait for at least a half year to a year, until the puppy had matured, and then we would reconsider the application. Not telling us about the puppy was sufficient for a rejection or delay, so we didn't have to go into the condition of the house. We haven't heard back from that applicant yet.

Long working hours are another cause of rejections, though we have been more tolerant recently, as long as there are some support people available close by, or perhaps a day care (which is probably quite rare for exotic birds). Here is an example of a rejection letter we have used due to long working hours:

*We have received your application for the adoption of a golden retriever.*

*We regret that we are unable to match you with a rescued golden. We note on your application that you work nine to ten hour days and this may not even account for driving to and from work. That is a very long time to leave a dog like a golden retriever alone. We feel that due to these long hours and the special needs of rescued golden retrievers, which are typically much more demanding of attention and contact than other dogs, that the hours alone would be too much for one of our dogs.*

*There is no doubt that you could provide a loving environment, but golden retrievers are real people dogs and require a lot of people time, based on our experience. We take in many dogs from people who are giving up their dog due to the fact that they work long hours and they just are not able to give the dog an adequate amount of attention.*

*We are sorry to disappoint you and wish you the best of luck in your search for another dog. Thank you for your interest in Golden Bond Rescue.*

We practically apologize for not being able to accept their application, which may help some people deal with the rejection. Here is another one that is used occasionally, involving infants or young children:

*After review of your application for the adoption of one of Alice's puppies, Golden Bond Rescue sincerely regrets to inform you that we are unable to adopt one of our rescued goldens to your family.*

*You will soon have an infant to take care of, and Golden Bond Rescue is always reluctant and extremely careful when it comes to placing dogs in this situation, as we have seen a relatively low success rate for such adoptions. The fact that your parents currently have a golden retriever and that you have had considerable experience with dogs is definitely a positive. Even though we would very much like to find such a home as yours for one of Alice's puppies, the commitment needed to take care of your child and a very young golden mix can be very challenging. We do not place very active dogs, young or otherwise, in homes with young children, as there is too great a possibility of the child being injured only because of the dog's exuberance.*

*Due to the above reasons, we feel we are unable to provide a dog for your family, but wish you luck in your endeavor to find a dog that meets your criteria for your family.*

Another more straightforward rejection is relevant to renters and the lack of a supporting landlord letter:

*The adoption team has received your application for a golden retriever and thanks you for your interest in one of our rescue dogs.*

*Perhaps the instructions on the application are not very clear, but we do need a personal reference from your landlord, meaning a written letter, letting us know that they approve of large dogs in their house. You did provide us with their names and phone number, and we thank you for that, but we also ask that you have them send a letter to us. They can use the same P.O. box address, just reference your name in their letter, or you may forward it to us.*

*We look forward to hearing from your landlord, at which time we will continue processing your application.*

We keep our names, phone numbers, postal and personal e-mail addresses out of rejection letters, to minimize the possibility of abuse, which we really haven't seen in any

case. It's just a good idea to be careful. Hopefully, these example letters give you somewhat of an understanding of our approach to rejections. We make a significant effort to obtain all of the information needed from an applicant and also spend plenty of volunteer energy making sure that the information is complete and correct.

## MEMBER COMMENTS

### About what should be our next step for growth

**Comment from Barbara:** Jonathan wrote, "You will need a few people who are experienced grant writers." I am not a grant writer and I did get a grant for my organization. I have also created a web page that will help animal welfare organizations get grants and in-kind donations: <http://www.petfoster.org/funding.html>. There is also a downloadable flyer promoting fostering at <http://www.petfoster.org/Flyers/Boxer.pdf>.

### About taking rescues from breeders

**Comment from Sue:** We take dogs into rescue from a miller (someone who runs a puppy mill) that dumps dogs a couple times a year. Some of the young ones do show genetic issues, from luxating patellas to malformed hip joints. When this was brought up to the miller, in hopes they would at least stop breeding the dogs that carry the bad genes, we were simply told to destroy any of the dogs we took that had a problem. At least we are altering the dogs before placement so they can't reproduce, but the miller had no interest in stopping the problems from happening on their end, and if they had, their solution would have been to simply kill the dogs.

So, this is a comment in reference to the discussion of breeders checking the puppies' hips, etc., at an early age and they could be easily treated at that point. Some breeders (as in the mass producers – the one I'm referring to has at least 250 dogs) just don't care what genetic flaws they are pumping out, but as a rescue, I am still thankful that they release the unwanted dogs instead of selling to another miller or killing them.

### About relatively painless rejection letters

**Comment from Rose:** If you have a fairly straightforward criteria list for adoption in which you say you will do a background check and that you are legally protected from hostile action from anyone, then you can tell the people applying that they failed to meet the criteria. They know why and you know why, that's all that is needed. I think an inquiry from a person who is applying isn't unfair and a truthful answer is fair in return. The kind of person who really loves animals shouldn't want it any other way!

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