

Shelter Solutions Volunteers

by *Kymerlie Barone, Director,
Pennsylvania Ferret Rescue Association
of Montgomery County*

Running an efficient and responsible shelter is a financially, organizationally, and emotionally demanding job. How can a shelter operator do everything—and do it well—without burning out? A dedicated group of volunteers can be the perfect solution.

For years I had reservations about having volunteers in the shelter. I liked my privacy and I was not comfortable delegating the responsibility of the ferrets in my care to others. Now, I don't know how I ever got by without my volunteers!

It all began when a few people who had adopted ferrets from the shelter offered to help out. I soon realized that these volunteers were serious, and I suggested they form a ferret club. With that, the Pennsylvania F.E.R.R.E.T. Club was born. We had about six members at first, and for most of the first year we did little other than clean the shelter sporadically and brainstorm. We had great ideas but didn't know how to implement them.

Even though we didn't accomplish much outside the shelter itself, I was grateful to have the physical help that the group provided. One club member cleaned cages while I was at work. Another created logos, nice-looking brochures, and signs. When I was out of town, the club members would take care of the ferrets. If we had a very sick ferret, club members would take him or her home and provide extra care.

When I realized how invaluable these volunteers were, we decided to expand the club. We advertised, created a Web site, and started participating in ferret shows. The club took off! We found new members, and each new face brought fresh ideas. We then found talented volunteers who made hammocks, bedding, and other items to sell at ferret shows.

Today, the Club is an integral part of the Pennsylvania Ferret Rescue Association of Montgomery County. Several members are at the shelter every weekend, whether I am there or not. Cleaning that used to take me days now is done in only a few hours. Every day while I am at work, one dedicated volunteer comes to the shelter to switch runtimes and check on the ferrets. Another club member comes every weekend and clips every claw and cleans every ear in the place—on average 50–60 ferrets. Once a month, she also brushes the

ferrets' teeth! We have a craft team that makes all of the items that we sell at the shows, which raises money for the cost of the ferrets' medical care. Another dedicated club member runs auctions on the Internet to raise additional, desperately needed funds.

Our club members are scattered widely, living as much as 90 miles west of the shelter and 120 miles to the east. This geographic range has been helpful in bringing ferrets to the shelter. We have many surrender requests from individuals who cannot find a closer shelter but who either cannot or will not make the trip to us. In these cases club members pick up the ferrets, process the paperwork, and bring the ferrets to the shelter the following weekend.

So how can using volunteers benefit your shelter? You may think that this is not possible in your area or that you don't have time to organize such a group. I once thought that, too, but help is out there—you just have to look for it. At first, recruiting volunteers will indeed take more of your time, but in the long run, you will be paid back tenfold or more, and you won't know why you didn't find volunteers in the first place.

Before you begin, identify the goals that you want your club or volunteers to meet. It is helpful, but not necessary, for you to have a few friends or occasional volunteers who can brainstorm with you.

Next, advertise. At first the name exposure may earn you a few more surrenders, but most replies should be from adopters and volunteers. Print a nice-looking flyer that states that your shelter is looking for a few good volunteers to help with the ferrets. Use brightly colored paper to grab attention. A cute picture of a ferret can't hurt! Post your flyers in appropriate places, especially veterinary offices and pet stores. Don't limit yourself too much. I have only six club members that live within ten miles of the shelter. Use the telephone books at your local library to get the addresses of veterinarians, pet stores, and other animal shelters within a reasonable radius of your shelter and send your flyers to them, requesting that they be posted. Don't be discouraged if your phone doesn't ring off the hook right away. It may take some time, but you will get calls!

So now you have a few interested people; what do you do? I recommend that you invite each person individually to your home. This gives you an opportunity to show him or her the shelter, talk about ferrets, and get to know your volunteer. After you have met with three or four people, set the first group meeting. Bring the volunteers to a place where they can interact, and at that point, ideas will start to flow. Here are a few tips from our club:

Making the most of volunteers

Get a pocket organizer with a calendar and a notebook.

Jot down ideas and review these often. Set firm dates for events. We found that suggesting that we do something was very different from scheduling the same event. We would say "we should do a ferret awareness day" but found we never had the time. Now, we simply schedule a date for an event, and it becomes a reality.

Give direction. When the Club gathers for a shelter cleaning, for example, everyone is assigned a specific duty. This has helped to focus the efforts of each volunteer so that the time spent cleaning the shelter is reduced.

Find incentives. Although most volunteers will not expect anything in return for their time, it can help morale to give back to them in little ways. I offer shelter pricing on vaccines, free boarding of ferrets when members go away, club picnics, an occasional dinner for a member who did something especially helpful, and pizza at meetings.

Assign committees when a club is large enough. This creates ownership of certain tasks and makes club members feel more important. We have a craft coordinator, fundraising coordinator, and coordinators of special projects.

Communicate regularly. We use eGroups, an Internet-based service. eGroups provides a members-only Web site where you can schedule meetings and events (the site will even send reminders of events ahead of time), a database to hold member information, and space to post meeting minutes and other files. (For more information, go to www.eGroups.com.)

Set schedules and stick to them. Monthly meetings keep a group more focused than meetings held less often. Weekly shelter cleanings also give more opportunity to participate, and there is never any question of when the next cleaning is scheduled.

Give volunteers a sense of belonging, show them how they are contributing, and value their dedication. You will be rewarded with a great shelter and a loyal group of people whom you value not only as great help, but as true friends.

Dedicated to the devoted, hard-working, and compassionate members of the Pennsylvania F.E.R.R.E.T. Club. You will never know how much each one of you means to me. I am overwhelmed by your commitment, dedication, and support. I could not do this without you.

— Kym Barone

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