

Want to start a ferret shelter/rescue? Please read this first!

Starting a ferret shelter/rescue should not be taken lightly. There are many good hearted folks who thought they were going to help ferrets and in turn ended up hurting themselves and others along the way. If you are new to ferrets and want to help then ferret out your closest ferret shelter and volunteer. If there isn't a ferret shelter close then volunteer for your local animal shelter. Find out what sheltering is all about. Next, be sure to own ferrets for a couple years. It's only after living and caring for ferrets that you will truly understand just what it takes to care for ferrets during the good times as well as the hard times. Trust me, when you are a shelter there are many more hard times.

The following was written by the American Ferret Association's (AFA's) current Shelter Committee Director, Mary McCarty-Houser, back in 2007 when she was asked to give some advice to someone wanting to start sheltering. Please read and if you can't check off everything that is needed then starting a ferret shelter may not be best for you at this time.

First, you need to contact your local government (including the zoning office) and find out if you are okay to run a shelter from your home and if any permits are required. Make sure you get EVERYTHING in WRITING.

For example, I have been in my current location since July of 1997 and I had contacted my zoning office when I first moved in and was told that there were no problems with running a shelter. Just this spring I was told by the zoning officer that I could not run a shelter and since I had no proof of our prior conversation, we had some tense moments until we got it worked out. I now have to fill out a one-time Home Occupancy Permit for \$25 and I am good to go.

FYI - New Jersey requires a permit and it's \$100 a year.

Each state is different and counties/townships can differ, as well.

Now, how long have you had ferrets? Do you have a ferret knowledgeable vet (preferably vets) that are willing to work with you? Are you, yourself, knowledgeable about ferret illnesses, etc.? As a shelter, you will be doing a lot of nursing care yourself and you will get a lot of old, sick ferrets.

I have learned to give sub q fluids, hand feed, draw blood, give vaccinations, give injectible meds (subq and IM), oral meds, etc. Just to name a few things....

These are definitely things you want to have your vet teach you if you don't already know how to do them.

Do you have a quarantine area in a separate building where you can put ferrets until they are ADV tested and vet checked and can come into the main shelter (usually in your home)? Quarantine is very important so that you don't expose your personal ferrets (or the ferrets in the shelter) to anything contagious.

Ferrets should always be ADV tested prior to coming into the shelter. Vaccinations are preferable, but many folks don't vaccinate so it's something you will likely have to do with each ferret.

A ferret with no vaccination history will need 2 canine distemper vaccines (2 - 4 weeks apart) and one rabies. Purevax by Merial is the only USDA approved canine distemper vaccine on the market approved for use in ferrets. When Purevax is not available then Nobivac DPv (The Puppy Shot) is recommended and is safe for use in ferrets. *(More information on vaccines can be found at www.ferret.org)*

Imrab-3 is the only rabies vaccine approved for use in ferrets.

Do you have the cages, etc. to set up a shelter in a room in your house?

What are your fundraising plans to make money to keep the shelter running? Cages, food, litter, bedding and most especially vet care, cost money. My shelter has a personal budget of \$1200 a year (I have \$100 from my paycheck each month go into the shelter account). But my bills run around \$10,000 a year (and I have anywhere from 10-25 ferrets in the shelter at any one time), so I have to come up with the difference with fundraising.

Grants are pretty much non-existent, donations are few and far between, adoption fees barely cover the intake cost. You could do ebay auctions, have garage/yard sales, put on a frolic or ferret show, get a second job just for the shelter, hold raffles, etc.

I usually do a Frolic once a year, I have hosted a ferret show twice in the last 4 years, I do boarding of ferrets for other people, I do candle sales, resale stuff from the Ferret Store (*no longer in business*) to local ferret owners, etc.

Fundraising is a lot of work, so if you can have a volunteer dedicated to just that, it would be great.

Which brings us to volunteers....you must have volunteers or you will burn out and close down. You can't do it on your own, trust me. I work a full time job, I travel at least 4 to 7 times a year for business and I have 3 steady volunteers that help anywhere from once/week to 1 to 2 times a month. It wasn't always like this and I was very close to burn out myself.

I usually do weekly shelter cleanings (and then do the scooping of the pans, etc. myself during the week otherwise). I have a big spring cleaning on a weekend in the summer where I invite everyone who is on my yahoo group (volunteers, other local ferret owners, adopters, etc.) to help me. Some who want to volunteer less sometimes only make it to this cleaning session, but every bit helps.

Volunteers could do the website, create forms, help with FAD's (Ferret Awareness Days), etc. and especially they are invaluable with fundraising.

You will also need to set up a website (or facebook page), create your contracts (surrender, adoption, boarding, etc.), forms (ferret info intake form, adoption application, vaccination info, etc.) and get business cards.

You may also want to create or purchase brochures on ferret information (like the What is a Ferret brochure on the AFA website). Something that you can put out in the local pet store or at your vets office. This helps educate them AND let them know that you are out there.

You will want to network with the other rescues in town - the rescue community works well together regardless of animal with referrals, expos, FAD's, etc.

* *Items italicized have been updated for 2014.*

And more from Mary from a recent post on the AFA Facebook Page

I've seen many posts about people opening new shelters not only here on Facebook groups, but as personal posts to me as the AFA Shelter Director. I've been sheltering since 1997 - other longtime ferret directors and I have noticed a disturbing trend that I wanted to comment on. While we all love to see so many enthusiastic folks (and goodness knows we need more ferret shelters), unfortunately the majority of these folks are jumping in with both feet before they have done any of the necessary research and work needed to become a successful working ferret shelter.

Opening a shelter is a lot of work, a lot of expense (monetarily, physically & emotionally) and it really requires thought and careful planning before you do it. When folks go into it without doing any of the foundation work, they burn out shortly and within a year or two, the ferret community has to clean up the mess. This has been proven time & time again (I've been there, done that & I'm trying to prevent it from happening again). I understand the desire to help, but I can't urge these folks enough to take the proper steps.

Please speak to other longtime (ie 5+ years under their belts) shelter directors, get a copy of the AFA Shelter Guidelines (you don't know what you need to know until you do the research) and start slow. It is so easy to be overwhelmed. My main point is, if you are going to do something, please do it right so that the ferrets are safe and well cared for while in your care. You also have to be doing it right so the ferrets will be safe and well cared for once you adopt them out. There is a reason why this information is so important - the longtime shelter folk have learned many things over the years and we are just trying to prevent you from making our mistakes AND save you time from re-inventing the wheel.

It's also important to have a well respected name in the ferret community. It would be wise for people to work on that before they start asking people for money. The more people who know you, know how you treat your ferrets and how you run your shelter, the more likely they are to send their dollars your way. As far as fundraising - it's always better to offer something in return for folks hard earned cash. Begging for donations is not part of a fundraising plan. If you don't have the cash in hand to start a shelter and a steady job to pay the bills when the shelter fund has no money, then you are not ready to take in that first ferret.

The ***AFA Ferret Shelter Guidelines*** is a great reference booklet all those thinking about starting a shelter should have. This 26 page booklet was written and edited by ferret shelter directors, animal shelter personnel, physicians, researchers, veterinarians, and ferret breeders from around the nation. The Guidelines discuss ferret husbandry, shelter personnel, health care and maintenance, suggested adoption procedures and related appendices.

You can find it for sale on the AFA webpage <http://www.ferret.org/shopping/education.html>