



7371 Atlas Walk Way, #212; Gainesville, VA 20155 USA
www.KittenCoalition.org Info@KittenCoalition.org

Rosemarie Crawford, LVT – Co-Founder National Kitten Coalition

Full Paper:

Within about the past 10 years or so in the US, the concept of Kitten Nurseries has become more and more popular. For most organizations, however, it was only that, - a concept. Too much was still not known or understood by most to successfully go about establishing and maintaining a working kitten nursery.

Due in large part to interest and questions from communities around the country and also due to the personal passion of members of NKC, The National Kitten Coalition undertook a project to investigate what was required to create and manage a successful kitten nursery.

In 2016 we visited five of the US's leading kitten nurseries to see what we could learn – and then share – about the intricacies behind these nursery operations and what is required to be successful.

The five nurseries The National Kitten Coalition nursery research team visited were:

ASPCA in New York

Austin Pets Alive! In Texas

Best Friends LA in California

Jacksonville Humane Society in Florida

San Diego Humane in California

All of these organizations were amazingly generous with their information and access. We spent several days with each organization's administration discussing budgeting, staffing, policies, etc. and viewing first-hand their space and operations. We also spent time with staff and volunteers getting personal insights and a hands-on perspective.

The communities that each of these nurseries serves are different, and their facilities, budgets and staffing needs are all different as well. From these differences, though, some similarities surfaced.

- All were operating nurseries in order to save more kittens.
- All emphasized the need to have a well-established, robust foster program in place before starting a nursery.
- All found ways to overcome obstacles and continue improving – with an emphasis on remaining flexible, undertaking formal reviews at least yearly and informal ones throughout the year.



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- All agreed that nursery capacity should be based on the number of available fosters, volunteers and staff rather than the number of cages which could fit into a space or the number of kittens needing care.
- All recognized the importance of community involvement and made efforts for collaboration and coalition building.

When communities have programs in place for TNR, Spay/Neuter, Managed Intake, Foster Programs, Veterinary services, Food Pantries, etc. and STILL find that kittens are being euthanized, something more must be done.

Continue working to establish and expand other programs that humanely minimize the numbers of kittens and that work with members of the community to provide additional care or alternatives, and then also consider establishing a kitten nursery.

Various models for kitten nurseries:

NONE are meant to be a place for kittens to grow up in and spend their entire pre-adoption lives. They are temporary stop overs until the next foster home becomes available in several days – not weeks. This is why it is crucial to have a strong and extensive foster program. Ideally, kittens should go straight to foster or spend only several hours to a few days in the nursery.

Nurseries may be as small as a converted closet or as large as a warehouse.

Some function as stand-alone facilities separate from shelter, others as part of the included shelter space.

Each model has advantages and disadvantages for considerations such as staffing, disease control, access and storage of supplies/inventory, utilities, billing, etc.

Regardless of if nurseries are stand alone or integrated into a larger facility, they all have some similar requirements:

Minimum requirements for equipment:

Cages, tables, chairs, laundry, refrigerator, computer, microwave, water (access)

Supplies for daily feeding and care – including scales!

Staffing considerations:

It may be possible to start a small program only with fosters, but all organizations reported needing at least 2-3 staff members for overall management of program and to ensure that a paid person (with job on the line) was present at each shift.

Training is essential for staff and volunteers.

Scheduling - A dedicated person to set up and manage the staff and volunteer schedule is essential to ensure that all shifts are fully covered and that kittens receive necessary care on time.



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Transport - Some nurseries serve several shelters. Therefore, setting up a transport schedule and having person available to oversee transports is essential. The nursery must know daily how many kittens it can transfer in and when to anticipate arrivals.

Protocols for everything:

Intake, feeding, cleaning of kittens, cages, supplies, facility, medical, scheduling, training, etc. etc. etc. If more than one person asks the same question about something, that's a clue that you need written information and/or a protocol in place.

It may seem like a lot, but it will make your life easier in the long run. Protocols are especially important when it comes to the direct care of the kittens. EVERYONE must be on the same page and know how, when, why things are done and know that all staff and volunteers are following the same standards of care for feeding, sanitation, etc.

Funding:

In general, it is impossible to put an exact number to the overall cost of the nursery or a cost per kitten. Each community is different. The bottom line, however, is that funding must be sustainable. It is not enough to do a campaign to raise money to start the nursery if you don't know where next year's funding will come from.

Have a broad base of individual donors – and keep growing it. Kittens sell themselves and getting donations tends to be easier for kittens than for some other programs.

Always research and write for grant money.

Businesses and suppliers of items needed for nursery and kitten care may be donors. For example, space is sometimes donated by businesses or property owners, and manufacturers of supplies may donate items in exchange for advertising.

Special events such as 'Kitten Showers' engage the community and create awareness and support for your programs. Several nurseries report getting 80% or more of their total operating budget and supplies from the Kitten Shower. These are often tied with an adoption event having the added benefit of kittens finding new homes.

Growing the nursery program:

As with other things, you may need to start small and grow as you are able. 10 kittens one year, 100 the next and 1000 after that! Hopefully by that point (or before), you will also start seeing your numbers decrease as other programs continue producing results that reduce kitten numbers.

Determining success and making adjustments:

It is important to evaluate your program yearly and measure your impacts – for internal numbers, budgeting, planning for space, supplies, staff, etc., but also for reporting to your donors, grant makers and community. Keep track of how many kittens were cared for and the impact you are making in your community. What partnerships have been established, what others might you consider? What policies and protocols need to be updated? What worked



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well, what could be better? The most successful nurseries undertake a formal yearly review and do informal reviews throughout the year – making adjustments as needed.

Conclusion:

Kitten Nurseries can have a tremendous impact on lives saved, but they require some supporting programs. Most importantly, an extensive foster program with well-trained foster caregivers is necessary for providing the kittens with better housing, individualized care and socialization. This foster program must always be recruiting and training new fosters as well as providing ongoing support and training for current foster caregivers. Sources of funding must, likewise, always be sought out and relationships with donors and grant givers maintained and nurtured. Do not determine capacity for care based on facility space or number of kittens needing care, rather determine it based primarily on the numbers of caregivers available with additional considerations for budget and physical space. Be flexible and creative in approaching and solving difficulties and areas for improvement, and keep focus on the benefit to the kittens in order to help steer the decision-making process.

Additional resources:

The National Kitten Coalition's Manual, *Launching and Operating a Successful Kitten Nursery*, 2017, 102 pp. Available for free download from:
<https://kittencoalition.org/resources/kitten-nursery-manual>

Kitten Nursery Consultations to help you plan, implement, manage or troubleshoot your program. Please contact Info@KittenCoalition.org

Thank you for all you do to help animals – especially kittens!