

# The Ins and Outs of Transferring Residency Programs



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## RESIDENT PEARL

- Transferring residency programs is difficult but possible. The decision to transfer residencies may be anxiety producing, but with substantial motives, the rewards of transferring can be worthwhile.

Transferring from one residency program to another is uncommon but not impossible. There are many reasons why a trainee may wish to pursue transferring training programs—to be closer to family, to leave a stressful environment, or to pursue a different specialty. The transfer applicant must navigate the process without structured support. There can be downsides as well as great rewards to successfully transferring residency training programs.

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Transferring from one residency program to another is rare but not unheard of. According to the most recent Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education *Data Resource Book*, there were 1020 residents who transferred residency programs in the 2020-2021 academic year.<sup>1</sup> With a total of 126,759 active residents in specialty programs, the percentage of transferring residents was less than 1%. The specialties with the highest number of transferring residents included

psychiatry, general surgery, internal medicine, and family medicine. In dermatology programs, there were only 2 resident transfers during the 2019-2020 academic year and 6 transfers in the 2020-2021 academic year.<sup>1,2</sup> A resident contemplating transferring training programs must carefully consider the advantages and disadvantages before undertaking the uncertain transfer process, but transferring residency programs can be achieved successfully with planning and luck.

## Deciding to Transfer

The decision to transfer residency programs may be a difficult one that is wrought with anxiety. There are many reasons why a trainee may wish to pursue transferring training programs. A transfer to another geographic area may be necessary for personal or family reasons, such as to reunite with a spouse and children or to care for a sick family member. A resident may find their program to be a poor fit and may wish to train in a different educational environment. Occasionally, a program can lose its accreditation, and its residents will be tasked with finding a new position elsewhere. A trainee also may realize that the specialty they matched into initially does not align with their true passions. It is important for the potential transfer applicant to be levelheaded about their decision. Residency is a demanding period for every trainee; switching programs may not be the best solution for every problem and should only be considered if essential.

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## Transfer Timing

A trainee may have thoughts of leaving a program soon after starting residency or perhaps even before starting if their National Resident Matching Program (NRMP) Match result was a disappointment; however, there are certain rules related to transfer timing. The NRMP Match represents a binding commitment for both the applicant and program. If for any reason an applicant will not honor the binding commitment, the NRMP requires the applicant to initiate a waiver review, which can be requested for unanticipated serious and extreme hardship, change of specialty, or ineligibility. According to the NRMP rules and regulations, applicants cannot apply for, discuss, interview for, or accept a position in another program until a waiver has been granted.<sup>3</sup> Waivers based on change of specialty must be requested by mid-January prior to the start of training, which means most applicants who match to positions that begin in the same year of the Match do not qualify for change of specialty waivers. However, those who matched to an advanced position and are doing a preliminary year position may consider this option if they have a change of heart during their internship. The NRMP may consider a 1-year deferral to delay training if mutually agreed upon by both the matched applicant and the program.<sup>3</sup> The binding commitment is in place for the first 45 days of training, and applicants who resign within 45 days of a program that tries to solicit the transfer of a resident prior to that date could be in violation of the Match and can face consequences such as being barred from entering the matching process in future cycles. Of the 1020 transfers that occurred among residents in specialty programs during the 2020-2021 academic year, 354 (34.7%) occurred during the first year of the training program; 228 (22.4%) occurred during the second year; 389 (38.1%) occurred during the third year; and 49 (4.8%) occurred in the fourth, fifth, or sixth year of the program.<sup>1</sup> Unlike other jobs/occupations in which one can simply give notice, in medical training even if a transfer position is accepted, the transition date between programs must be mutually agreed upon. Often, this may coincide with the start of the new academic year.

## The Transfer Process

Transferring residency programs is a substantial undertaking. Unlike the Match, a trainee seeking to transfer programs does so without a standardized application system or structured support through the process; the transfer applicant must be prepared to navigate the transfer process on their own. The first step after making the decision to transfer is for the resident to meet with the program leadership (ie, program director[s], coordinator, designated official) at their home program to discuss the decision—a nerve-racking but imperative first step. A receiving program may not favor an applicant secretly applying to a new program without the knowledge of their home program and often will require the home program's blessing to proceed. The receiving

program also would want to ensure the applicant is in good standing and not leaving due to misconduct. Once given the go-ahead, the process is largely in the hands of the applicant. The transfer applicant should identify locations or programs of interest and then take initiative to reach out to potential programs. FREIDA (Fellowship and Residency Electronic Interactive Database Access) is the American Medical Association's residency and fellowship database that allows vacant position listings to be posted online.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the Association of American Medical Colleges' FindAResident website is a year-round search tool designed to help find open residency and fellowship positions.<sup>5</sup> Various specialties also may have program director listserves that communicate vacant positions. On occasion, there are spots in the main NRMP Match that are reserved positions ("R"). These are postgraduate year 2 positions in specialty programs that begin in the year of the Match and are reserved for physicians with prior graduate medical education; these also are known as "Physician Positions."<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, advertisements for vacancies may be few and far between, requiring the resident to send unsolicited emails with curriculum vitae attached to the program directors at programs of interest to inquire about any vacancies and hope for a favorable response. Even if the transfer applicant is qualified, luck that the right spot will be available at the right time may be the deciding factor in transferring programs.

The next step is interviewing for the position. There likely will be fewer candidates interviewing for an open spot but that does not make the process less competitive. The candidate should highlight their strengths and achievements and discuss why the new program would be a great fit both personally and professionally. Even if an applicant is seeking a transfer due to discontent with a prior program, it is best to act graciously and not speak poorly about another training program.

Prior to selection, the candidate may be asked to provide information such as diplomas, US Medical Licensing Examination Step and residency in-service training examination scores, and academic reviews from their current residency program. The interview process may take several weeks as the graduate medical education office often will need to officially approve of an applicant before a formal offer to transfer is extended.

Finally, once an offer is made and accepted, there still is a great amount of paperwork to complete before the transition. The applicant should stay on track with all off-boarding and on-boarding requirements, such as signing a contract, obtaining background checks, and applying for a new license to ensure the switch is not delayed.

## Disadvantages of Transferring Programs

The transfer process is not easy to navigate and can be a source of stress for the applicant. It is natural to fear resentment from colleagues and co-residents. Although transferring programs might be in the best interest of

the trainee, it may leave a large gap in the program that they are leaving, which can place a burden on the remaining residents.

There are many adjustments to be made after transferring programs. The transferring resident will again start from scratch, needing to learn the ropes and adapt to the growing pains of being at a new institution. This may require learning a completely new electronic medical record, adapting to a new culture, and in many cases stepping in as a senior resident without fully knowing the ins and outs of the program.

### Advantages of Transferring Programs

Successfully transferring programs is something to celebrate. There may be great benefits to transferring to a program that is better suited to the trainee—either personally or professionally. Ameliorating the adversity that led to the decision to transfer such as reuniting a long-distance family or realizing one's true passion can allow the resident to thrive as a trainee and maximize their potential. Transferring programs can give a resident a more well-rounded training experience, as different programs may have different strengths, patient populations, and practice settings. Working with different faculty members with varied niches and practice styles can create a more comprehensive residency experience.

### Final Thoughts

Ultimately, transferring residency programs is not easy but also is not impossible. Successfully switching residency programs can be a rewarding experience providing greater well-being and fulfillment.

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