5 things to do if you aren’t getting enough residency interviews

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Meet Your Match | Managing Interview Invites with Liz Southworth, MD.

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Having a bit of anxiety around physician residency interviews is natural. And if you aren’t getting the volume of interviews you aimed for, it’s likely heightened.

Ami DeWaters, MD, MSc, is associate professor of medicine at Pennsylvania State University College of Medicine, a member school of the AMA Accelerating Change in Medical Education Consortium. She has worked as a mentor to numerous medical students during the residency-selection process.

For residency applicants who feel they aren’t getting enough interview invitations, Dr. DeWaters outlined a few steps that can be taken to help remedy the situation.

Stay patient

According to data from the National Resident Matching Program (NRMP) the median number of interviews for Matched applicants in the 2020–2021 cycle was 14, but getting those interview invites can take time.

The weeks in which the most interview invitations are sent tend to be the second and third weeks after programs can access applications. But the pace remains fairly steady for at least a month after that. So, if you haven’t received invitations from programs—and you haven’t been told you will not be getting an invitation—staying patient is paramount.

“You don’t always hear back right away,” Dr. DeWaters said. “Keep in mind that as programs are extending interview invites, they are waiting to see who accepts and declines. As people decline, those programs move through their list and extend additional invites.

“I tell students I’d like to hear from them by mid-November to reassess if they haven’t gotten at least a couple interviews scheduled.”
The AMA Road to Residency series is here to help medical students, international medicine graduates and others find their best residency match. Find articles and resources to help you ace your residency interview, put together your rank-order list, and more. The AMA is here to help you advance to the next step of your medical career.

Know your standing

Dr. DeWaters said one important exercise is to gain an understanding of how competitive your application is, as well as how competitive the programs to which you are applying are.

“When a student comes to me and says they are worried they don’t have enough interviews, we look at the list of programs they applied to and review their application,” she said. “Maybe they sent their application to too many very competitive programs.”

Metrics such as grades and board scores are still an indicator of individual competitiveness. Program competitiveness can often be similarly subjective, relying on the number of applicants and rankings from publications.

Consider additional applications

If you are short on interview invitations, Dr. DeWaters said it is worth applying to additional programs.

“In the past, I have had a few students be successful by applying to programs later in the process, so I consider it worthwhile,” she said.

“I really encourage students to make a list of non-negotiables before they apply. They want to hold onto that list and consult it if they are applying to more programs. If their non-negotiable is they have to be in a community-based residency program, then we are going to use that to guide the additional programs they add.” For those looking to gain insight on additional programs, no online resource contains as much information as FREIDA™, the AMA’s comprehensive residency and fellowship database®, which includes more than 12,000 Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education-accredited residency programs, and offers a streamlined user experience.

Gain more insight on residency interview invitations.

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Reach out to your network

If physicians you have worked with at your institution or other areas of your career, such as organized medicine, have connections at residency programs to which you are applying, it might be helpful to ask them for a kind word on your behalf.

“There are benefits to using your mentor network,” Dr. DeWaters said. “Ask those physicians if they know anyone at those programs and will advocate for you.

“A lot of students ask me about the benefits of reaching out to a program director to ask them to consider them for an interview or to review an application. I’ll be honest in saying that I haven’t seen that be incredibly beneficial, but I don’t think any harm is done by doing that.”

Find out more about what not to do during your interactions with program directors.

Let the process play out

In the end, if you’ve done the leg work, it only takes one interview to make a match.

“I had a student who had only received one interview, and they were very nervous about their ability to match,” Dr. DeWaters said. “We went through additional scenarios where we thought we could get additional interviews, and it didn’t happen. When they went to that program for an interview, they loved it—and that student matched into a wonderful program. It is absolutely possible even with low numbers of interviews to end up in an excellent program where you are going to get excellent training.”

Learn with the AMA about the three residency interview questions you should prepare for.