

**Frequently Asked Questions Related to  
Master Affiliation Agreements  
and  
Program Letters of Agreement**

**Question 1: What is the difference between *master affiliation agreements* and *program letters of agreement*?**

**Answer:** Master affiliation agreements (also referred to as institutional agreements or MAAs) are agreements between a Sponsoring Institution and all major participating sites involved in residency education (Institutional Requirements, I.C.2.). "Major participating site" is defined as follows: A Review Committee-approved participating site to which all residents in at least one program rotate for a required educational experience, and for which a master affiliation agreement must be in place. To be designated as a major participating site in a two-year program, all residents must spend at least four months in a single required rotation or a combination of required rotations across both years of the program. In programs of three years or longer, all residents must spend at least six months in a single required rotation or a combination of required rotations across all years of the program. The term "major participating site" does not apply to sites providing required rotations in one year programs. (see "*Master Affiliation Agreement*")

In addition to developing master affiliation agreements, a sponsoring institution must assure that each of its accredited programs has program letters of agreement (PLA) with sites involved in educating residents (Institutional Requirements, I.C.3.). Thus, in contrast to master affiliation agreements, program letters of agreement originate at the program (instead of the institutional) level and are required for each participating site providing a required assignment (Common Program Requirement I.B.) Program directors should consult and review specialty/subspecialty program requirements and the respective Review Committee webpage for further details on this issue.

**Question 2: What information do *master affiliation agreements* and *program letters of agreement* need to contain?**

**Answer:** The Institutional Requirements do not stipulate what needs to be covered in master affiliation agreements. These documents need to be reasonably current, that is, renewed every five years, and signed by the appropriate parties. If nothing in the master affiliation agreement has changed at the end of five years, the Institutional Review Committee will accept an amendment signifying review and extension of the agreement with signatures. The Common Program Requirements stipulate that program letters of agreement should:

- a) identify the faculty who will assume both educational and supervisory responsibilities for residents;

- b) specify their responsibilities for teaching, supervision, and formal evaluation of residents;
- c) specify the duration and content of the educational experience; and,
- d) state the policies and procedures that will govern resident education during the assignment.

Like master affiliation agreements, program letters of agreement should be renewed at least every five years.

**Question 3: What is the stated purpose of program letters of agreement?**

**Answer:** Program letters of agreement provide details on faculty, supervision, evaluation, educational content, length of assignment and policy and procedures for each required assignment that occurs outside of the sponsoring institution. These documents are intended to protect the residents by ensuring an appropriate educational experience under adequate supervision. So, unlike master affiliation agreements, which tend to be complex legal documents, program letters of agreement are intended to be short, less formal documents (approximately one-two pages in length) that address, as simply as possible, the four points noted in question 2.

**Question 4: What is the minimum experience for which a program letter of agreement needs to exist between a residency program and a site involved in residency education?**

**Answer:** Program letters of agreement are required between the residency program and all sites to which residents rotate for required education or assignments.

**Question 5: Are program letters of agreement necessary for “courses” such as the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology course or the Bellevue Hospital Toxicology Course?**

**Answer:** Courses, like the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology course or the Bellevue Hospital Toxicology course, are not examples of “sites ” and, therefore, do not require program letters of agreement.

**Question 6: Are master affiliation agreements and program letters of agreement needed when sites are closely associated? For instance would program letters of agreement be necessary between a University Hospital and the Children's Hospital with which it has close ties?**

**Answer:** A residency program sponsored by a University Hospital that requires a rotation/assignment at the Children's Hospital would need a master affiliation agreement and a program letter of agreement if the two entities are operated by two different governing bodies (e.g., Board of Directors). However, if the two sites operate essentially as one entity, that is, they are governed by one governing body (e.g. Board of Directors) neither a master affiliation agreement nor a program letter of agreement would be necessary. This reasoning applies to all closely associated sites, not only those between University and Children's Hospitals.

A program letter of agreement would not be required for a rotation to an integrated site if the written document that is required between the sponsor and the integrated site incorporates the elements of the program letters of agreement (Common Program Requirements I.B.1.a.-d.). Including all the required elements in the integration agreement will eliminate the need for a separate program letter of agreement and integration agreement.

**Question 7: Are program letters of agreement necessary for rotations to physicians' offices, nursing homes, ambulatory surgical centers and other similar learning environments?**

**Answer:** In keeping with the answer provided to Question 6, program letters of agreement are not necessary if the following on-campus or off-campus site is under the governance of the sponsoring institution or is an office of a physician who is a member of the sponsoring institution's teaching faculty/medical staff: nursing and assisted-living homes; hospice facilities; faculty patient care offices; private physicians' offices (volunteer faculty); ambulatory surgical centers; diagnostic centers, e.g. imaging, laboratory, etc.; treatment centers, e.g. dialysis, rehabilitation, chemotherapy, etc.; other similar sites. Rotations to these types of sites that are not governed by the sponsoring institution or that occur in offices of physicians who are not members of the sponsoring institution's teaching faculty/medical staff require program letters of agreement. Because some Review Committees have stricter criteria, program directors should consult and review the specialty/subspecialty requirements and the Review Committee webpage for more specific details on this issue.

**Question 8: If a program director and/or faculty functions within multiple participating sites that educate residents (e.g., the program director oversees the program at the sponsoring university hospital and is also the local director at the VA medical center), does he/she need a program letter of agreement with him/herself?**

**Answer:** As noted in the responses to Questions 6 and 7, program letters of agreement are not necessary when a rotation/assignment occurs at a site under the governance of the sponsor or in an office of a physician who is a member of the sponsoring institution's teaching faculty/ medical staff. However, in the example in this question, the VA is unlikely to be under the governance of the sponsor, so the program director needs to appoint a local director at the VA site who is accountable for the day-to-day activities of residents (Common Program Requirements II.A.4.b). A program letter of agreement between the program director and the local director would be necessary in this example.

**Question 9: Who should sign the program letters of agreement for the sponsoring institution? Who should sign for the participating sites?**

**Answer:** A program letter of agreement should include the signatures of the program director as initiating the letter and the local director at the participating site. The official signing for the participating site to which the residents rotate should be the individual responsible for supervising and overseeing resident education at that location, e.g., the local director or, in some cases, the medical director. Although the requirements do not specify that the program letter of agreement include the signature of the Designated Institutional Official (DIO), institutions may find it prudent to include this signature. The program director, DIO and the Graduate Medical Education Committee (GMEC) of the Sponsoring Institution should make this decision.

**Question 10: Does a subspecialty program need a separate program letter of agreement if the specialty (core) program already has a letter of agreement with a particular institution?**

**Answer:** Although a single program letter of agreement that provides the Review Committee with appropriate information (i.e., the content of the experience, supervision, evaluation, length of assignment, the policy and procedures) for both the specialty and subspecialty programs would be acceptable, such a document may be long and overly complicated. The preferred strategy would be to develop two separate letters, one for the specialty program, and another for the subspecialty program.

**Question 11: When should program letters of agreement be updated?**

**Answer:** Agreements should be updated whenever there are changes in program director or participating site director, resident assignments, or revisions to the items specified in the Common Program Requirements I.B.1 a-d. Program letters of agreement must be renewed at least every five years. If nothing in the agreement has changed at the end of five years, it is acceptable to add an amendment signifying review and extension of the agreement with signatures.

**Question 12: At the time of the site visit, which document (the master affiliation agreement or program letter of agreement) will the site visitor be interested in verifying?**

**Answer:** During an institutional site visit the site visitor will be primarily interested in reviewing and verifying the master affiliation agreements that the Sponsoring Institution maintains with major participating sites. During a program site visit, a program director should have the program letters of agreement available for review by the site visitor. Site visits to programs located at single-program sponsoring institutions must have both documents available for site visitor at the time of the visit.

Program directors and Designated Institutional Officials should contact the Review Committee Executive Director for more specific details or further clarification.

The following sample templates for program letters of agreement have been prepared to assist program directors in preparing these documents for the program. They represent the minimal detail acceptable to the Review Committee. Addition of more detail is not required and occurs at the sole discretion of the program director, DIO, or GMEC of the Sponsoring Institution or participating site.