

Frequently asked Question and Answers

What is a Fire Service Exchange Program?

An exchange program briefly defined: “is an opportunity for two persons of the same profession, working for different employers to temporarily exchange their jobs for a defined period of time”. Currently Fire and Emergency personnel and their families exchange between Canada, Australia and the U.S. for one year. These people exchange duty hours, working arrangements and vacation for the term of their exchange. They do not exchange salaries. They also pay their own airfare and other travel expenses. Their children exchange schools, and their families either exchange accommodations directly or help each other arranging alternative living arrangements.

What is the purpose of an Exchange Program for the Fire Service?

An exchange program is more than just a learning experience. It offers a resourceful way of developing a higher level of professionalism. The opportunity for a change of environment offers a refreshing break for the employee. The Program is a personally and professionally rewarding opportunity that encourages a more diverse Fire Service and the positive development of our profession. Good firefighting and emergency work depends on knowledge that is gained through a collection of experiences.

The purpose of the exchange is to:

- Enable the opportunity for temporary mobility
- Promote a higher level of professionalism
- Afford Emergency Workers and their families a dynamic life experience
- Share knowledge to improve efficiency
- Strengthen international fellowship and boost morale

Who qualifies?

Generally only full time career firefighters qualify for this program. However we have successfully exchanged a Communications Officer in the past.

Applicants must have a minimum of 4 years' full time career experience. Applicants are selected with due regard for their aptitude, performance, competence and contribution to their profession.

TFS Officers note: At the discretion of the Chief Officer, positions within the Station Officer/Senior Station Officer, Communications Officer ranks will be allowed to exchange. Officers will temporarily drop to the rank of Leading Firefighter, including rate of pay, for the period of exchange and upon completion of the exchange be reinstated to their respective permanent rank and rate of pay.

How long is an exchange?

An exchange is usually a year although under some circumstances exchanges of greater or lesser duration may be possible.

What is the first step I need to take?

You need to make enquiries within your own agency to ensure an exchange will be supported, without this, an exchange **will not** proceed. There needs to be someone with the appropriate authority to oversee the process, usually referred to as the “Exchange Coordinator”. Your Human Resources Department is a good place start, or if you know someone who has previously been on an exchange, find out who managed their program.

Can I just complete one application form for consideration of all services in Australia and New Zealand?

Each fire service in Australia and New Zealand is managed separately. As a result, there are differences in the categories of firefighter, some having unique areas of responsibility and differing processes for selection. Each agency may also have slightly different application procedures. You will find that there are many similarities between application forms which you could ‘copy and paste’ if you are intending to apply to more than one service.

What are the responsibilities of the Applicant for Exchange?

The applicants are responsible for all travel costs, banking arrangements, obtaining work or exchange visas, schooling arrangements, accommodation arrangements and any other contingencies that may arise out of their exchange.

In short, the applicant is responsible for almost everything. Every attempt is made to assist with guidelines on how to proceed with an exchange but it is up to the applicants to work through the steps required to finalize the exchange.

What are the most important criteria for this program?

Primary to the success of a systematic International Exchange Program is exchanging personnel who are adaptable and able to work in diverse situations, and who possess a keen interest in improving professional development of the Fire Service. This program can only be successful if those who choose to exchange apply for the right reasons.

What about Professional Associations or Unions and Working Agreements?

This program has been endorsed by a number of International Associations. Most Associations value this program and are anxious to offer this dynamic lifestyle experience to their members. Their interests are protecting the integrity of their Working Arrangements while at the same time improving the Fire Service. As a result exchanging parties will accept the terms of the Department or Brigade they are exchanging to. A “guest employee” will also become a “guest member” of the Association or Union of the employee they are replacing. Applicants should ensure that their Union Executive is supportive of the program and will adjust their constitution appropriately to provide for a “guest member”.

Do I require a work visa on an exchange?

You do not require a work visa if you are exchanging within your own country. You will require a work visa if you are exchanging outside your own country. Work visas vary from country to country, applicants are requested to obtain information on visa requirements from the Embassy or Consulate of the country they wish to exchange to. Allow sufficient time to apply for a work visa, inquire with the consulate or Embassy as to the length of time required to obtain an appropriate work visa. If you are exchanging to a foreign country do not count on obtaining a work visa for family members unless they are a national citizen of that country.

What about income tax?

Even though you are being paid by your Fire Service throughout the duration of the exchange, you might be required to file an Income Tax form if you have been in a foreign country for a period of time. It is your responsibility to investigate this possibility.

Do I require out of Country Health Insurance?

This is a complicated question but generally the answer is “yes”. It is advisable to be certain that you are adequately covered for dental and medical while out of your own country. Check with your current Insurance carrier to examine the amount of out of country coverage they offer you under your existing policy. You might be required to purchase additional coverage to subsidize the amount. There are a number of out of country insurance policies available. Shop around the prices can vary for the same extra coverage. It might also be possible to purchase a policy for non-residence health plan within the country you are exchanging to. Consult your exchange partner to investigate various options.

How will I be paid will I am on the exchange?

You maintain your employment with your current fire service and therefore all salary and benefits are maintained by your existing employer, even whilst on the exchange.

How will I be paid overtime?

Any overtime accrued needs to be recorded and then taken as time off in lieu. There is generally no facility for overtime payment whilst on exchange.

What about Holidays and Leave while on an Exchange?

The exchanging firefighters agree to accept the vacation or leave period of the person they are replacing. In short, they become that person for the term of the exchange. This includes the: the vacation choice (how the vacations are selected within a crew), the number of days or weeks off on leave, lieu days or any extra leave, and the debiting of that leave by the host agency from the persons leave ‘bank’ they are replacing.

The date the exchange is completed, is the date the firefighters now becomes themselves again. Only at this point do firefighters use the vacation or leave they are entitled to from their “Permanent Employee”.

Problems might arise because of the difference in vacation scheduling between Departments and Brigades. To prevent this, Exchanging firefighters must work out any differences as fairly as possible. If there is a discrepancy regarding vacation, the firefighters will accept the lesser of the leave.

The difference in vacation schedules often causes concern and some anxiety with firefighters who fear they may lose entitled vacation because of a discrepancy. It is up to the firefighters to be as fair as possible with each other when dealing with vacation. Common courtesy and clear communications between the firefighters is the only way to sort out discrepancies.

How do I arrange schooling for my children?

Teachers have had an exchange program in place for over 90 years. Most educational institutions identify an exchange as a worthwhile opportunity for our children and are willing to accept modifications to your child’s school year. Your exchange partner can locate the appropriate school and help you make school arrangements.

What about banking?

In today's global community international banking is generally not complicated. Consult your bank for the least expensive transfer of funds.

What happens if I get injured in the workplace, whilst on the exchange?

It is important that you ensure that your current workers insurance will cover you whilst on exchange. If it doesn't, you will need to arrange personal accident cover for the duration of the exchange. More information on this is covered in the application booklet. Evidence of satisfactory accident insurance will be a requirement of the exchange.

Who pays for my travel and other expenses?

All costs associated with the exchange are to be met by you. This can include, but is not limited to, travel, visa and schooling costs.

What about accommodation?

Applicants for exchange can either exchange their accommodation directly or they can work with their exchange partner to arrange alternative accommodations. Every effort should be made between exchange partners (i.e. photos, videos, lengthy telephone conversations) to ensure they are satisfied with the living arrangements and surrounding environment prior to embarking on the exchange.

Exchanging accommodation.

If you choose to exchange accommodations you are expected to provide your exchange partner with at least the basics: fridge, stove, washer dryer, TV, furnishings and linen. Any personal belongings you don't want them to use should be stored away from the residence (perhaps with relatives). Usually persons exchanging accommodations cover their own rent or mortgage or taxes. The utilities are paid by the occupant during the exchange. Some people exchanging accommodations appoint a friend or relative as a Power of Attorney over their property. The Power of Attorney welcomes the exchange family and deals with any problems in the owners absence.

It is not recommended that cars are exchanged, as this is usually one area of an exchange that leads to dissatisfaction.

Do I need Power of Attorney?

A Power of Attorney is someone, usually with signing authority, whom you appoint to take care of your affairs in your absence. If you are out of the country for an extended period of time it's a good idea to give a friend or family members "Power of Attorney".

What an exchange is not.

An exchange is not a paid holiday. You will be employed on contract with another Fire Service and you have the same responsibilities that you do with your own Fire Service. The purpose is to enable you to experience another way of life and a different work environment. This is a dynamic opportunity that allows you to use your new location as a base in which to explore other places of interest, and learn more about your profession. On arrival to your "Host Employer" you assume the role as ambassador of your department. You are also a guest employee and a guest union member of a different Association. Appropriate etiquette is a necessity to ensure the ongoing success of the program.

Factors to consider before applying for an exchange.

1. **Finances:** The cost of living varies from country to country, but usually the difference is not that extreme. It is advisable to inform yourself with the differences in cost of living and plan a conservative budget based on regular income. In addition to your travel costs you should have extra funds available for unforeseen contingencies. If you're exchanging within your own country you may notice very little difference in the cost of living. Most exchanges who travel outside of their country use the new exchange location as a base in which to travel to other parts of the world they had only previously dreamed about. Be sure to factor extra travel funds into your budget, this program is a dynamic opportunity for extended travel. Don't miss it.
2. **Income:** Some exchange countries allow spouses and dependents to work: however employment may not be easy to find. Usually unless the spouse or dependent is a national, employment is not allowed. Do not count on having your spouse find employment through normal channels, you will be disappointed.
3. **Adaptability:** You might be required to live and work in diverse situations foreign to your usual environment. You should be prepared to adapt to the change and be tolerant of different lifestyles. If you choose to exchange your home, normal wear and tear should be expected. Good will goes a long way when dealing with situations that might arise while exchanging your home. An exchange is an opportunity to work and live in a different environment. The key word is "different". If you do not consider yourself easily adaptable to a different living and working environment, then do not apply for this program.
4. **Children:** Children rely on a routine, they are not as adaptable as their parents because their security base is focused on their immediate surroundings. An exchange is a great opportunity for your children to meet new friends and experience a new environment, but it can take them a while to become settled. Anticipate this adjustment of your children and plan to manage this adjustment in advance.
5. **Diplomacy and Communication:** It is not uncommon for exchange partners to think they understand each other, only to discover at a later date they do not. Accents and localisms can often be taken the wrong way. It is important you are clear on any key issues. If you do encounter a misunderstanding, diplomacy goes a long way. An exchange takes time and patience to evolve, in the end the experience is usually worth it. Keep a log of information collected and an ongoing list of questions that might pop into your mind. Most of all when you are there, recognize and respect the differences.

What are my chances of getting an exchange once accepted into the program?

One of the hardest parts of the exchange process can be locating a suitable exchange partner. In the case of the Tasmania Fire Service (TFS) it will be up to individuals to arrange/locate suitable exchange partners. The TFS does not locate exchange partners. The TFS Exchange Coordinator receives regular overseas enquiries from firefighters enquiring about the program. Generally these exchange opportunities will be e-mailed to all staff allowing anyone to make direct contact with the firefighter making the enquiry. *Note that it can sometimes take years before a match is found.*

Not all applicants accepted into the program will locate an exchange match. It is difficult to predict whether a match can be found for each applicant. Every match requires a willing partner at each end. The more places you are willing to exchange to and the more flexible you are with time, the better chance you have of finding an appropriate exchange. Generally most applicants will exchange accommodation, however if you are flexible in this area it might also enable a better chance of an exchange match.

If I am accepted into the program am I committed to an exchange?

You should only apply for this program if you are serious about accepting an exchange, however the approval of your application does not commit you to an exchange opportunity that you might not be satisfied with. You will need to work out accommodation arrangements, schooling and details prior to embarking on an exchange. You should be committed to developing the exchange match you have located. You should realize that your exchange partner is dramatically affected by any changes that you make. Weeks of negotiation and expense could be wasted if you are not committed to developing an exchange opportunity. Applicants should assume professional responsibilities to the commitment taken when applying for the program.

Does it cost to apply?

There is no cost.

Do I need to arrange for a driving license whilst on exchange?

You may wish to pursue obtaining an international driver's licence to enable you do some additional travelling and sightseeing during your exchange. However, you will not be required to drive or operate an emergency vehicle during the exchange period, so a licence is not a requirement.

Will I have to pay for my uniform and protective equipment?

Your exchange employer (host) will provide all necessary clothing and PPE for the duration of the exchange. These items will be on loan and must be returned upon completion of the exchange.

What happens if I need to take sick leave during the exchange?

In addition to following the standard procedure of the host agency (so they can ensure the shift is covered), you will be responsible for notifying your home agency/pay office, as per normal procedures that you would follow if you were not on exchange. It is recommended that you ensure that you bring with you, or have access to, appropriate documentation for this purpose. Sick leave is taken and accrued as if you were still at your home agency.

What if I need to take bereavement leave?

The same circumstances apply as per sick leave.

What will happen when I arrive at my host employer?

You will be required to undergo an induction process which relates to the competencies required by a firefighter employed by the host fire service so as to ensure readiness for duties.

What record keeping is required whilst on exchange?

It is important that, as well as personal records (eg: leave), you will also need to complete and retain any event records (eg: exposure reports) and provide copies to both the host employer and your home agency.

Summary of an employment exchange.

The simplest way to understand the concept of exchange is to view the exchange as a replacement. Your replacement becomes you in your absence from the date you begin the exchange until the date the exchange is final. Salaries and benefits are not exchanged, you will be continued to be paid by your "Permanent Employer". You will be exchanging work hours, leave, holidays and positions. You will adopt the policies and working agreements of the "Host Employer" and you will wear clothing and protective equipment provided by the "Host Employer". Most importantly, the success of the program depends on sending the right people for the right reasons.

What do I do now?

Get on the internet and research both the demographics and agencies you are interested in applying to. Make contact with these agencies – good luck.