

## Long history of problems for Montgomery's tuition assistance program

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Montgomery County's tuition assistance program, designed as a way to spur job advancement and improve the performance of employees, has been riddled with abuse allegations for much of the past year.

The county started investigating the program in July 2009, after Sheriff Raymond Kight was informed that police training companies were offering public safety officials sniper rifles and handguns at steep discounts subsidized by taxpayers.

Subsequent probes revealed a number of classes that seemingly had little to do with employees' jobs, such as art, fashion and religion lessons.

A report released by Inspector General Thomas Dagley in March found more than 200 public safety officials received the weapons at dirt-cheap prices. He also concluded the County's Ethics Commission poorly monitored conflicts of interest, with nine training companies making nearly \$640,000 through the program -- despite employing county workers.

In coming months, officials argued that Detective Aaron Bailey, and his company, Applied Sciences for Public Safety, defrauded taxpayers of more than \$400,000 by using the publicly funded classes to sell the discounted weapons.

The county attorney's office later attempted to recoup the money by suing Bailey, but a circuit court judge dismissed the lawsuit in June, saying officials implemented few rules dictating how the money should be spent.

And county officials decided not to seek money from individual officers who may have misused the program.

According to records obtained by *The Examiner*, complaints about the program date back more than a decade. Former Inspector General Norman Butts found that employees from the Division of Fleet Management Services were reimbursed for classes that were a "waste of county funds amounting to a giveaway."

The county suspended the program last fall after encountering "serious questions" about the nature of some of the classes taken. The fraud allegations prompted federal investigators to explore whether the program was misused.

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