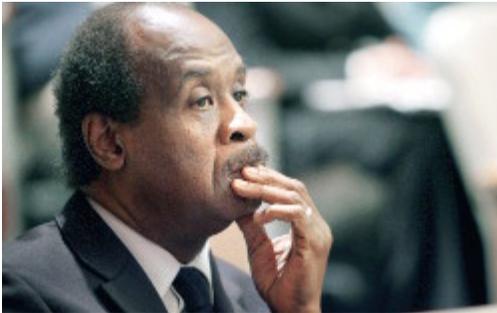


# Audit reveals little oversight of tuition assistance applications

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Montgomery County Executive Ike Leggett (Examiner file photo)

Montgomery County officials failed to scrutinize hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of taxpayer-funded training classes for county employees, a new audit shows.

The report released by the county's Office of Internal Audit reveals that government employees often took tuition assistance classes without approval from their supervisors or giving proper documentation or reason for taking the courses. That exposed the county to "waste, fraud and abuse," the report said.

In a random sampling of training classes taken between July 2006 and December 2009, nearly 35 percent were improperly approved. Set against the total amount of classes during the period, the county devoted an estimated \$805,000 to tuition assistance courses without the required documentation.

The report is yet another blow to the once widely popular program, which has come under fire in recent years and was ultimately suspended for misusing taxpayer dollars.

Among the study's other findings:

- » Half of all sampled applications did not require approval from an employee supervisor or department head.
- » The county is entitled to recover at least \$43,000 from employees who were given money for the classes but then terminated.
- » Nearly two dozen sampled applications included payments for items such as books or food, which weren't allowed to be funded by the program.

Despite halting the courses last fall, new revelations continue to undermine the reliability of the program's oversight.

A recent police probe obtained by *The Examiner* shows about 360 police officers between fiscal 2007 and 2009 took training courses under the tuition assistance program while on the clock - costing taxpayers \$273,000. County employees were not allowed to take the classes during their official workday.

Coupled with more than \$400,000 in public money county officials say was squandered on steep gun discounts, the tuition assistance program wasted a minimum of \$700,000 in taxpayer money, according to the findings.

Sailing retreats, hot yoga sessions and Spanish lessons in Costa Rica were among the classes approved as part of the program, *The Examiner* first reported.

County officials say they would like to bring back the courses, but funding was not included in the current budget. Bargaining agreements recently approved by County Executive Ike Leggett call for tuition assistance funds to be restored in fiscal 2012. The county's internal audit also found that the program's newly revamped policies still lack proper cost controls.

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Read more at the Washington Examiner: <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/local/Audit-reveals-little-oversight-of-tuition-assistance-applications-1008032-100163534.html#ixzzOwDihOPfK>