

# MontCo IG slams administration's handling of tuition program

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March 9, 2010

Chronic neglect and lax oversight by Montgomery County managers led to hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars being wasted in a tuition assistance program for county employees, according to a damning new report issued by the county's independent inspector general.

Inspector General Thomas Dagley said the county's lack of action and oversight had led to a situation that "will continue to expose county taxpayer dollars to waste and abuse" until changes are made.

Dagley's report comes less than a week after the county charged in a civil lawsuit that county police officer Aaron Bailey and his training company defrauded taxpayers by more than \$400,000 by using the tuition assistance program to sell guns to public safety officials at steep discounts.

The critical portrait of county managers is more bad news for County Executive Ike Leggett: The county lost a decision in arbitration to keep the tuition assistance program suspended for police officers; and *The Examiner* reported Sunday that federal investigators are probing the program, the third federal examination of county spending practices in the last two years.

Among the IG's key findings:

- » The county Office of Human Resources' lack of oversight and "inadequate internal controls" resulted in 216 public safety officials buying semiautomatic weapons for personal use that appear to be mostly funded by taxpayers.
- » The county doesn't have "proper management oversight and controls" to keep track of police officers' time sheets. A random sample by the IG's office found that 30 of 60 police officers who took a tuition assistance course in the last three years did so while on duty, despite certifying they wouldn't.
- » The county ignored procurement procedures for awarding contracts over \$5,000. For example, the finance department paid Bailey's company up to \$60,000 almost monthly for more than a year without following procedures.
- » The county's Ethics Commission, which regulates employees' secondary employment, doesn't properly guard against potential conflict of interest. Nine training companies, in

which county employees had an economic interest, made \$638,884 through the tuition program.

Chief Administrative Officer Tim Firestine wrote in a memo that the county had done "extensive work" to reform the tuition program. In addition to the lawsuit against Bailey, the police department was reviewing time sheets of officers who took tuition assistance courses since 2007, and the county had implemented new controls that he said would deter fraud.

The county suspended the program in September after *The Examiner* reported that county funds were being used for questionable classes, such as Bible and glass-fusing classes.

The Ethics Commission said none of its rules had been broken, and Leggett's spokesman said procurement rules don't apply to employee benefit programs such as tuition assistance.

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