

Montgomery County considers ways to prevent misuse of tuition assistance funds

Program has been suspended for lack of oversight

by Erin Cunningham | Staff Writer

Montgomery County government could begin providing employees with money to attend training courses and college classes as soon as July, officials said Monday.

Some County Council members, however, disagree with how the program should be managed if it is reinstated.

Furthermore, officials say that the program, which was suspended last year, would have to be smaller and include more oversight in an effort to prevent the fraud and abuse that put the county's tuition assistance program in the spotlight in 2009.

At that time it was revealed that Montgomery County police used taxpayer funds to pay for training courses in which they received deeply discounted guns.

A review of the tuition program found employees also were improperly reimbursed to take courses in fitness, the Bible and crafts.

"Why are we paying for certain courses that appear to have no relationship to anything?" said Council President Valerie Ervin (D-Dist. 5) of Silver Spring. "Should the taxpayer be paying for a course on 21st-century composers?"

Under changes to the tuition assistance program proposed in September by County Executive Isiah Leggett (D), employees would be allowed to take courses only that relate to their current job. Only accredited providers would be approved, and employees would have to take the courses in their free time, according to the changes considered by a council committee Monday.

However, Council President Valerie Ervin (D-Dist. 5) of Silver Spring said Monday that the revised policy appears unfair to employees who want to switch jobs within the county. The county's finance and government operations committee rejected Leggett's revised policy Monday.

Councilwoman Nancy Navarro (D-Dist. 4) of Silver Spring, who chairs the committee, said she believed Leggett's proposed policy was too narrow.

"It seems to me this is punishing people who want to go up the ladder," Ervin said. "It's punishing people for doing the right thing."

The problem, said Stuart Weisberg, with the county's Office of Human Resources, is that almost any course could be linked to a potential job change within county government. For example, a bus operator could apply for tuition money to take finance courses, saying he or she wanted to work in the county's budget or finance offices.

About \$1 million was spent in fiscal 2009 on tuition assistance for 727 employees to take 933 courses, according to county data. The program was scaled back in fiscal 2010 after concerns over waste were raised, and the county spent about \$500,000.

The program was suspended in fiscal 2011, which began July 1.

Weisberg said he expects less money to be available if the program is reinstated this year. The county is facing at least a \$300 million budget shortfall in fiscal 2012, which begins July 1, and recently scaled back some financing of capital projects.

Some aspects of the county's tuition assistance program are left up to contract negotiations with employee unions. Gino Renne, president of the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1994/Municipal and County Government Employees Organization, said the tuition money is part of current contract negotiations, which are expected to continue through next month.