

# Montgomery County to bring back abused tuition assistance program

By: [Rachel Baye](#) | 11/21/11 8:05 PM

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Montgomery County lawmakers are preparing to reinstate a tuition assistance program that was shut down two years ago following revelations of widespread abuse.

In anticipation of the return of the program suspended in June 2009, the County Council's Government Operations and Fiscal Policy Committee discussed changes on Monday that would protect the county from some of the practices *The Washington Examiner* uncovered in 2009 -- like employees taking hot yoga classes, studying religion, spending \$1,000 on sailing lessons and learning Spanish in Costa Rica, all on the county's dime.

Under the proposed changes, the county would pay only for courses taken at an accredited institution and would not cover classes that "are primarily recreational or utilize a specific faith-based method as a primary approach to problem solving." An employee's department director and the director of the Office of Human Resources must sign off on the employee's course load before the employee can enroll in the program.

Employees may take courses only in fields that relates to their current job functions or "career ladder," or, in the case of people enrolled in degree programs, that prepare them to make a career change to another position within the county government.

But since some degree-earning programs require physical education courses, some employees likely would get approval to take "Introduction to Golf," for example, even under the new rules, Human Resources staff member Stuart Weisberg cautioned the council members. Human Resources Director Joe Adler assured the council that oversight by his office would prevent abuse of the program.

Still, committee Chairwoman Nancy Navarro, D-Eastern County, asked Human Resources to submit an annual report to the council to make sure the program is not abused.

The rules would apply to non-union employees. Similar regulations are under negotiation with both the Montgomery County Municipal and County Government Employees Organization and the county's Career Firefighters Association before the tuition assistance program can be reinstated for those groups as well, Adler said.

The program already was reinstated for the Fraternal Order of Police, whose members were responsible for some of the larger incidents of abuse, including spending \$400,000 on taxpayer-

subsidized, heavily discounted guns -- such as Glock handguns -- and taking courses while on the clock. Though the police were originally not limited in the amount of county funding that could be spent on courses, they now have a \$135,000 annual limit, Adler said.

FOP President Marc Zifcak could not be reached for comment.

The changes to the program are a step in the right direction, said County Inspector General Edward Blansitt, but the rules also have to be properly enforced for them to make a difference.

"There's always the possibility when you're paying for somebody's education that it's going to go to waste," he said.

The full council must vote on the new regulations before the program is reinstated.