

# FAIRFIELD COUNTY TUITION REIMBURSEMENT POLICY

## **Purpose**

It is the desire of Fairfield County to create an environment that stimulates, challenges, and encourages employees to broaden their knowledge and skill by continuing their education. Reimbursement of primary expenses associated with a degree program or individual course work is available to those employees who meet the criteria and successfully complete the program or course.

The tuition policy applies to the following departments; Commissioners, Emergency Management Agency, Economic Development, Maintenance, Job and Family Services, Utilities, Dog Shelter and Adoption Center, Auditor, Treasurer, Prosecutor, Recorder, County Judges, Clerk of Courts, Coroner, Sheriff, Board of Elections, Veteran Services, and FCFACF Council.

The program does not include agencies of the Soil and Water Conservation District, Park District, Health Department, Regional Planning, and the Multi-County Juvenile Detention Center. It does not include councils of governments, such as the Major Crimes Unit. It does not include Developmental Disabilities, Engineer, and ADAMH as they have their own policies.

During the pilot period of this policy, eligible courses must correspond or be applicable to the employee's current position or department within the county. If there is interest to include courses that would correspond or be applicable to a position with a participating County department that is outside the employee's current department, the policy can be adjusted to include this expansion.

## **Scope**

Eligible employees are those full-time employees working at least thirty-five (35) hours per week.

## **Definitions**

**Employee:** any full-time (working at least thirty-five hours per week) individual who has completed their initial probationary period within their current Fairfield County department.

**Accredited:** an institution that has been state certified and is registered with the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools or another accrediting agency recognized by the Committee on Recognition of Postsecondary Accreditation. Courses completed through accredited online colleges and universities may also be eligible based upon requirements set forth in this policy.

**Reimbursable Expenses:** Fairfield County will reimburse the employee upon completion of the course(s) 50% of the costs for course tuition and lab fees, not to exceed \$5,000 annually, which must be paid in full by the employee prior to reimbursement under this policy.

Statement of Justification: A written narrative that fully explains the relationship of the course to the applicant's career goals and how the course may impact the employee's knowledge and skill level. The applicant and his/her supervisor must submit a Statement of Justification attached to application for each request.

Non-reimbursable Items: Items such as study guides/text books, notebooks, pens, paper, travel expenses, parking fees, student health insurance fees, deferred payment fees, enrollment and/or application fees, administration fees, general fees and graduate fees are considered non-reimbursable items.

Good Standing: The employee must not have had any written warnings, suspensions, or other disciplinary actions filed, nor be subject to a performance improvement plan within one year of applying for tuition assistance. In addition the employee must have achieved at least a "meets standard" rating on their most recent performance evaluation.

## **Policy**

Fairfield County will reimburse an employee up to 50% for the actual course tuition and required lab fees charged to the employee. This amount should not exceed \$5,000 in total reimbursable expenses annually, during the County's budget cycle. The employee shall provide proof of payment in full before reimbursement will be processed.

### **1. Reimbursement Eligibility Requirements:**

Courses must correspond or be applicable to the employee's current position or department within the county and must directly benefit the county.

- a. Employee eligibility is based on the job-related performance of the employee, which must be in good standing prior to and throughout the period for which the tuition reimbursement was approved.
- b. No employee on a paid or an unpaid leave of absence, unauthorized leave of absence, disability leave, workers' compensation leave, or injury leave may apply for tuition reimbursement.
- c. The employee must have completed their initial probationary period and be at full time status (thirty-five hours per week) within their current Fairfield County department prior to applying for tuition reimbursement.
- d. The applicant's supervisor must provide a Statement of Justification explaining why it would be currently beneficial to the County to provide tuition reimbursement to the applicant.
- e. It is the responsibility of the employee to obtain approval for tuition reimbursement from his/her supervisor, the Department Head/Elected Official, and the County Department of Human Resources at least thirty (30) days prior to the start of the course(s) for each academic term.
- f. The employee must receive a grade of "C," its equivalent, or better to receive tuition assistance for each course that tuition reimbursement is requested.
- g. The college or university must be an accredited institution as previously defined.

## 2. General Information:

- a. Tuition reimbursement applies toward specific courses, associate and undergraduate degree programs, as well as post-graduate degree programs as long as the degree program coincides with the employee's position or department.
- b. Tuition assistance does not apply to seminars, workshops, conferences, certifications, or self-help courses.
- c. Due to many educational institutions offering satellite locations and internet capabilities, tuition reimbursement would be extended to those courses associated with an accredited university or college.
- d. All courses must be taken outside regularly scheduled working hours whenever possible. Flexible scheduling may be permitted with prior written approval of the employee's supervisor and/or Department Head/Elected Official. All scheduled hours for courses must be filed with the employee's supervisor and/or Department Head/Elected Official. All courses are subject to approval under the guidelines of this policy.
- e. If a course(s) is not successfully completed (grade of "C", its equivalent, or better), Fairfield County will not provide tuition reimbursement for that course.
- f. An employee who is terminated during current enrollment in the Tuition Reimbursement program through job elimination, a reduction in workforce, or who is transferred within the County will be reimbursed in accordance with the provisions of this policy.
- g. If an employee voluntarily resigns, retires, or is terminated with cause from the County and is currently participating or has participated within the last (3) three years in the tuition reimbursement program, he/she must repay the tuition assistance based on the following schedule:
  - i. 100% repayment of tuition reimbursement received if the employee is no longer employed by Fairfield County within one (1) year or less after the date the course was completed.
  - ii. 75% repayment of tuition reimbursement received if the employee is no longer employed by Fairfield County one (1) or more years but less than two (2) years after the date the course was completed.
  - iii. 50% repayment of tuition reimbursement received if the employee is no longer employed by Fairfield County within two (2) or more years but less than three (3) years after the date the course was completed.
  - iv. 25% repayment of tuition reimbursement received if the employee is no longer employed by Fairfield County three (3) or more years but less than four (4) years after the date the course was completed.
  - v. 0% repayment of tuition reimbursement if the employee is no longer employed four (4) or more years after the date the course was completed.
- h. The employee will have thirty (30) days following separation of employment with Fairfield County under these terms to make full and final payment unless a different payment arrangement has been mutually agreed upon.

- i. Fairfield County reserves the right to suspend or restrict tuition reimbursement at any time based upon the availability of funds. Current approved enrollees will remain eligible for reimbursement for their current approved enrollment period.
- j. Where applications exceed available funds, actions such as the following may be taken:
  - i. Fairfield County may reduce the number of courses or credit hours eligible for tuition assistance;
  - ii. Fairfield County may select employees whose learning needs are critical to the county;
  - iii. Fairfield County may set an official, uniformly applied percentage figure as the amount of tuition assistance for which Fairfield County is responsible;
  - iv. Fairfield County may reject any and all applications for tuition assistance;
  - v. Fairfield County may distribute available funds equally among eligible employees or reduce the maximum reimbursement per person.
- k. Fairfield County may place a cap on the account which funds the Tuition Assistance program when the maximum available funds are utilized. Fairfield County departments may contribute supplemental funding.

3. Taxable Income:

The use of tuition reimbursement may affect your taxable income. For more information, please consult with a tax advisor.

4. Application Procedure:

- a. Courses and degree programs shall be clearly classified as job-related, job-enhancement, and offer technical or skill growth that will enable the employee to perform at a higher level or prepare him/her for advancement within their department.
- b. Employees seeking tuition reimbursement must present verification from the educational institution of his/her acceptance for the specific degree program or course.
- c. The employee may contact his/her supervisor or the County Human Resources Department to obtain information on the Tuition Reimbursement Policy and the Tuition Reimbursement Application. The policy and application is found on the Fairfield County website: <http://www.co.fairfield.oh.us/>.
- d. The employee must fully complete the Tuition Reimbursement Application, attach the course schedule and description as well as the Applicant Statement of Justification/Supervisor Statement of Justification, and receive the necessary signatures for approval prior to submission to County Human Resources.
- e. Employees that report to appointing authorities other than the Board of Commissioners must have their appointing authority sign the application form prior to submission to County Human Resources.
- f. Employees under the Board of Commissioners must submit the form to County Human Resources without the appointing authority signature. County Human Resources will ensure completion of the appointing authority or designee's signature.

- g. The fully completed application (including necessary signatures as defined above) must be received by County Human Resources at least thirty (30) days prior to the beginning of the course(s) for which funds are sought. If the employee has registered for multiple courses, indicate all courses on the application.
- h. County Human Resources will review all applications to ensure policy requirements are met and funds are available, before approving or denying each application according to policy guidelines.
- i. County Human Resources will provide a copy of the completed application to the employee and supervisor following the review process.
  - i. All original applications will be retained in the County Human Resources Department.
  - ii. If County Human Resources denies the Tuition Reimbursement Application, the application and a written statement specifying the reason(s) for the action will be returned to the employee and the immediate supervisor.
  - iii. An employee whose request has been denied at any level, may ask for a meeting with the denying party and their immediate supervisor to discuss the reason(s) for denial.

5. Reimbursement Procedure:

- a. Employees will only be reimbursed after each course is satisfactorily completed according to policy guidelines.
- b. When the employee has successfully completed the course(s) for which tuition reimbursement was approved, the employee must submit the following documentation to the County Human Resources Department:
  - i. An itemized tuition statement, including tuition and lab costs, indicating full payment (a zero balance) and
  - ii. Grade report of a "C", its equivalent or better
- c. The County Human Resources Department will complete Section IV of the application and will forward the application and reimbursement form to the Auditor's Office for processing.
- d. If there are discrepancies or questions with the submitted documents, a delay in reimbursement processing may occur. The County Human Resources Department will contact the employee to rectify the discrepancies within a reasonable time.
- e. With the exception of the original reimbursement page, receipts, and grade information, the original Tuition Reimbursement Application and final documentation will be retained in the County Human Resources Department.