

Investing in Employees Through Tuition Reimbursement

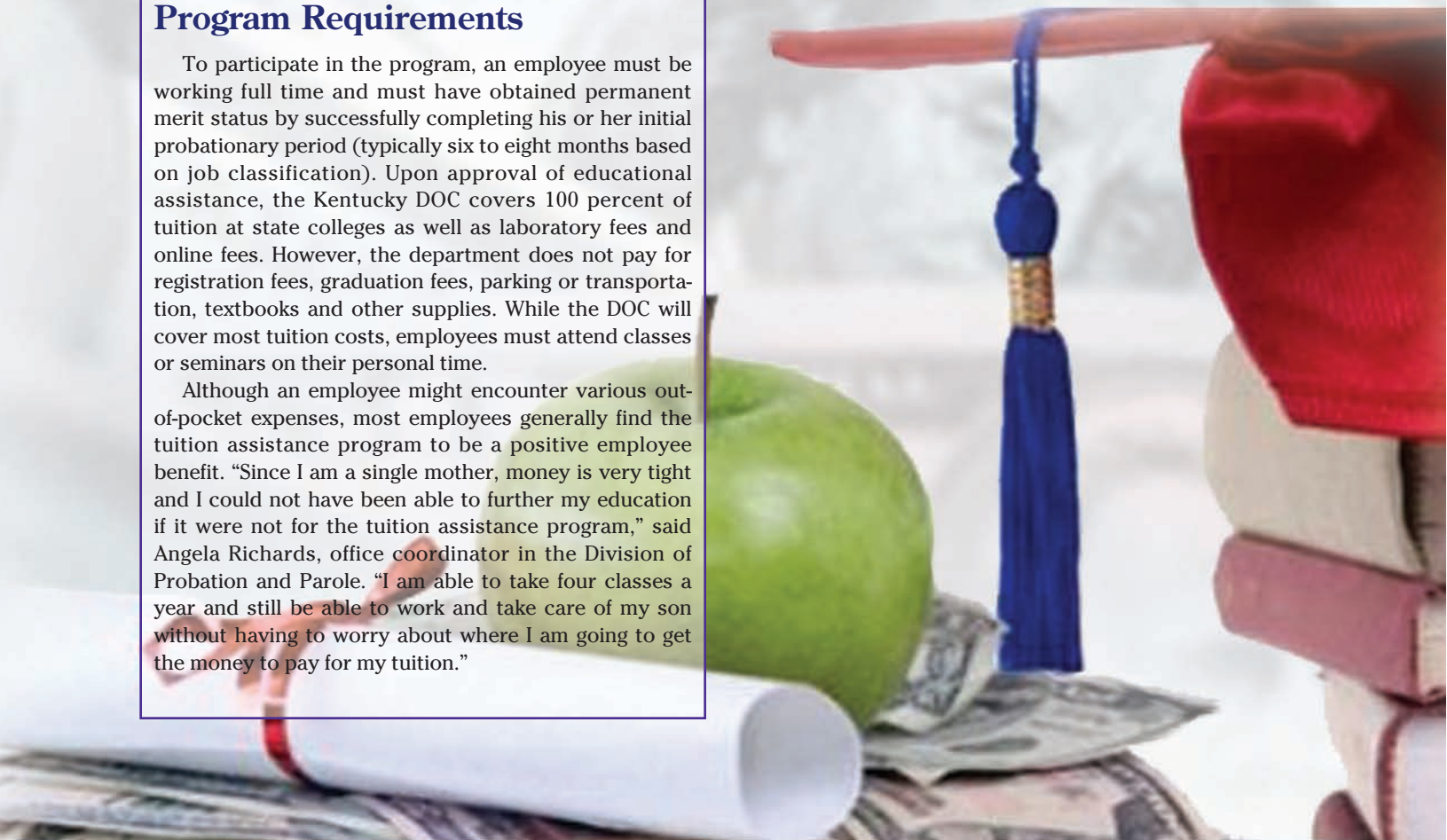
By Teresa Harris

Employee training and education is a critical part of the development of a successful employee. The Kentucky Department of Corrections strives to play an active role in the professional development of its employees by assisting with their pursuit of continued knowledge and skills needed for higher performance. To better prepare current DOC employees for future promotional opportunities or to help employees with individual career development, the department participates in the Commonwealth of Kentucky Employee Educational Assistance Program as administered through the Governmental Services Center. The program is a state-funded tuition reimbursement program for all permanent, full-time state employees and is designed to assist in defraying the expenses individuals incur when taking educational courses on their own time. This program is not only a benefit to employees, but also to the DOC and the commonwealth of Kentucky by producing an improved work force. Furthermore, by participating in this program, employees can have assistance in achieving their career goals.

Program Requirements

To participate in the program, an employee must be working full time and must have obtained permanent merit status by successfully completing his or her initial probationary period (typically six to eight months based on job classification). Upon approval of educational assistance, the Kentucky DOC covers 100 percent of tuition at state colleges as well as laboratory fees and online fees. However, the department does not pay for registration fees, graduation fees, parking or transportation, textbooks and other supplies. While the DOC will cover most tuition costs, employees must attend classes or seminars on their personal time.

Although an employee might encounter various out-of-pocket expenses, most employees generally find the tuition assistance program to be a positive employee benefit. "Since I am a single mother, money is very tight and I could not have been able to further my education if it were not for the tuition assistance program," said Angela Richards, office coordinator in the Division of Probation and Parole. "I am able to take four classes a year and still be able to work and take care of my son without having to worry about where I am going to get the money to pay for my tuition."



Employees can use the Educational Assistance Program to pay for courses offered by public and private colleges and universities, accredited correspondence schools, vocational and secondary schools, and educational television. Educational assistance is limited to accredited educational providers. Although the department allows the use of tuition assistance funds at private colleges and universities, enacted state regulations mandate an agency only provide funding at the designated rate of the closest state educational provider. If the private institution has a higher designated tuition rate than the closest state school, the employee must pay the difference out of pocket. In addition, the department will not approve educational assistance for out-of-state educational providers, unless the specific coursework the employee is seeking is unavailable within a state educational provider. If this occurs, the agency will pay the designated rate of the closest state school. This policy does not apply if the out-of-state institution is in the state in which an employee resides.

The Kentucky Personnel Cabinet and Kentucky Administrative Regulations enacted a detailed yet employee-friendly process and procedures to ensure the continued success of the program. The department typically only approves the pursuit of one undergraduate and one graduate degree. Requests for specific courses that are job related (not necessarily those in pursuit of a degree) may be granted if the courses are directly related to an employee's current position. All courses taken should have a direct relationship to the goals and programs of the agency and have a direct correlation with the employee's job effectiveness in current or future positions.

When applying for tuition assistance, employees must attach a copy of the curriculum to the tuition request form. If an employee requests assistance for a course that is not associated with the pursuit of a degree, he or she must attach a memorandum of justification to the Educational Assistance Program form, detailing how this particular course would be applied to the benefit of the department. This request will then be reviewed to determine the eligibility for tuition assistance.

State Funding

Funding for the Educational Assistance Program must come from each department's respective budget, and agency participation is determined by the availability of funds. Fiscal staff monitor the allocated funds for this program throughout the fiscal year, and participation in the program is analyzed at the beginning of each semester to determine if funds are readily available.

Funds are paid directly to the educational provider by the agency. An employee must first submit a program application to the Division of Personnel Services for approval. Once approved, the employee must forward a copy of the application to the educational provider. The educational provider then submits a bill directly to the DOC Human Resource Division for approval of payment, and payment is processed through the fiscal office. This seamless process enables the employee to focus on his or her work and studies and not be inundated with constraints of bills and payment.

The Kentucky DOC is fortunate to be able to offer this valuable and important employee benefit during these tough economic times. Although most states are having funding difficulty, including Kentucky, the Kentucky DOC has not eliminated this program due to its belief in providing a better work force. The department is well-recognized and applauded for its continued implementation and commitment to this endeavor. Employees continually praise the department for continuing to provide this added benefit during the current economic crisis.

As with any good program, there are conditions employees must accept to participate in the Employee Assistance Program. Participants must agree to remain employed by Kentucky State Government for a minimum of six months after completion of the last class. Although the DOC is paying for the classes, as long as the employee remains employed by the state, he or she does not have to repay the tuition assistance. In other words, an employee can transfer to another department within state government and not have to repay tuition funds. However, if an employee leaves state government for any reason other than retirement, that employee must pay back the funds received for classes taken within the previous six months. Funds received more than six months prior to an employee's departure would not have to be paid back. The employee can either pay back the funds up front or the department can recover the funds from the employee's last paycheck(s).

Proven Benefits

Many of the job classifications in the corrections field require a bachelor's degree as a minimum requirement for a position. Because a number of employees entering the department already have an undergraduate degree, the DOC receives numerous requests for educational assistance for those employees seeking graduate and post-graduate degrees. For example, the minimum requirements of the job classification of a probation and parole officer include a bachelor's degree. Therefore, employees like probation and parole officer Brittany Basberg often seek a master's degree to further their education and to achieve further career development. "The tuition assistance program has helped me continue to perform better as a probation and parole officer because it has created the means by which I can continue my education," Basberg said. "The classes that I am currently taking have illuminated areas of the criminal justice system that I knew little about before I started on my degree and this increased knowledge helps me serve my community efficiently."

Additionally, offering this program is a morale booster to staff and employees. Brenda Overstreet-Kopatz, an administrative specialist II at the Kentucky State Reformatory, is pursuing a Master of Science degree in the administration of justice. "The Commonwealth of Kentucky tuition assistance program has provided me with a phenomenal opportunity to achieve higher educational goals that has, and will, undoubtedly enhance my long-term career objectives," she said. "The support and encouragement of supervisors and employers has strengthened my determination and resolve to not only finish an advance degree, but to commit my life to public service. It is a gift that will keep on giving."

The DOC believes the Employee Assistance Program helps in the retention of its employees. When morale is high, productivity is generally higher and turnover is typically lower. These variables add to the profitability of the department. Thus, when investing in the careers of DOC employees, the agency is also investing in its own future.

The DOC has found that employees who use tuition assistance tend to stay longer with the department. People who are happy with their careers are not looking around for other employment. Vikki Woodard, a social service clinician who has been with the DOC for 13 years, is currently working on a doctorate in professional counseling. "It has always been a dream of mine to go on for the Ph.D., but I was never able to because of the cost," she said. "With corrections sharing the cost, it has made cost less of an obstacle and has allowed me to pursue the degree and fulfill my dream."

Company-sponsored tuition assistance programs are also a great recruitment tool. When potential employees are seeking employment, they are not only interested in the salary the job offers but also the benefits package. Tuition assistance attracts many people who may not have considered employment in the corrections field. The DOC has found this to be the case in speaking with students and job seekers at career fairs. Many younger job applicants find the program especially attractive since many are planning college careers or are currently attending college. They are pleased to learn they can attend college and get reimbursed for their classes while also starting their career. Offering a tuition assistance program attracts prospective employees who are career minded, and interested in longevity.

DOC employees are the agency's greatest asset and DOC administrators hope that by offering this program, employees feel some of the appreciation administrators have for them. When employees say that using tuition assistance to continue their education is a dream come true, it boosts management's morale.

"It has been my experience that the leadership of the Department of Corrections always recognizes staff as their most valuable asset. In that vein, I believe you must invest in the full development of that asset," said LaDonna Thompson, commissioner of the Kentucky DOC. "The tuition assistance program allows the department to demonstrate the importance placed on the personal goals of the individual, while at the same time benefiting from the results of a more educated staff."

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