



Cash-strapped Montgomery County adds six-figure wellness, innovation czars

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Cash-strapped Montgomery County will spend \$260,000 to add wellness and innovation chiefs in the same budget that raises taxes for homeowners.

The wellness coordinator will oversee a program aimed at improving the physical and mental health of county employees. The appointee, who will report to Human Resources Director Joseph Adler, is slated to earn \$110,000 in salary and benefits.

The program will help people develop healthier habits by exercising, eating healthy foods, losing weight and quitting smoking, said County Councilman George Leventhal, D-at large, head of the council's Health and Human Services Committee. The idea is that healthier employees save the county money in health care costs.

"We anticipate that there are substantial savings that are going to come from reduced utilization of health insurance," he said. "The entire purpose is to save taxpayers money. A lot of money."

Healthier employees are also more productive, said Dana Tofig, spokesman for Montgomery County Public Schools, which has had a wellness coordinator for nearly two years. "If you have teachers who are healthier and having fewer sick days, it lessens the need for a substitute."

Tofig could not confirm whether the schools have reduced health care costs, saying the program has not been in place long enough to see results.

The second position, a chief innovation officer, is expected to "assist in putting the data our county collects to work for our residents: turning information into services through cutting-edge technology like mobile phone apps," Council President Roger Berliner wrote in a memo to a council committee when the idea was introduced. The chief innovation officer is slated to earn \$150,000 in salary and benefits.

Berliner pointed to San Francisco, where a similar position exists. Venture capitalists have teamed up with the city to mine government data and create businesses from that information. Likewise, Montgomery County's data related to transportation, taxes, development processes and public safety could be valuable to tech-savvy entrepreneurs, Berliner said.

Chief Administrative Officer Tim Firestine, who will oversee the new position, has a slightly different vision.

"We don't need just a technology person. We've got a [chief information officer] for that," he said. "What really we need to know is, 'What is it the government's doing? ... What's a better way to deliver it?' "

Joan Fidler, president of the Montgomery County Taxpayers League, said the two positions make sense but the county should be integrating the job functions into existing positions rather than shelling out for new ones.

Cato Institute budget analyst Tad DeHaven agreed. "It sounds like a waste of taxpayer money to me," he said.

Most health insurance companies already offer wellness programs for employees, he said. And the chief innovation officer's job functions probably could be handled with existing staff.

"There's nothing inherently wrong with these things," he said. "It's just that I'm sure it could be handled by the bodies that they already have."

The County Council approved the \$4.6 billion budget for fiscal 2013 on Thursday.

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