

Gov't repaying more student loans for employees

Here's another example of the benefits enjoyed by some federal workers: 36 federal agencies provided 8,454 federal workers with more than \$61.8 million in student loan repayments in 2009, according to new statistics.

The figures represent a 20 percent increase in spending from 2008 and a 23 percent jump in the number of employees benefiting from the program. Loan repayments to federal workers averaged \$7,317, [the Office of Personnel Management announced Thursday](#). The program's beneficiaries represent a small percentage of the roughly 1.3 million civilian federal workers.

The federal government's loan repayment program started in 2002 as a recruitment and retention tool. Agencies can make repayments up to \$10,000 annually, with maximum payouts of \$60,000, but workers must sign an agreement to work for at least three years.

Government lawyers were the biggest beneficiaries in 2009, followed by criminal investigators, administrative personnel, intelligence analysts and contract specialists. The Justice Department paid out the most money, \$19.3 million, followed by the Defense Department (\$14.1 million), the State Department (\$7.2 million), the Securities and Exchange Commission (\$3.2 million) and the Government Accountability Office (\$2.8 million). But 14 unnamed agencies told OPM that budget restraints have hampered their ability to make repayments, potentially impacting recruitment efforts.

Agencies don't necessarily use the incentive widely since it may only be used to help achieve specific recruitment goals, OPM said.

"President Barack Obama has highlighted the importance of recruitment and retention tools and has asked each Federal agency to do its part to ensure 'this Government is as efficient as possible and that every taxpayer dollar that is spent is being spent wisely,'" OPM said in a statement accompanying the statistics.

Many companies, including The Washington Post Co., use tuition reimbursement or student loan repayments as recruitment and retention incentives. But news of the government's growing use of the benefit comes as fiscal conservatives and news outlets continue to warn about a growing pay gap between the public and private sector.

OPM Director **John Berry** has [panned those critics](#) -- including the [Cato Institute](#) and [USA Today](#) -- for comparing "apples and oranges," arguing they use statistics that don't accurately reflect the pay gap. Critics say the data they cite better account for the government's generous benefits program, which is responsible for most of the growing gap.