

Disability spending in MontCo dwarfs Fairfax

By: [Brian Hughes](#) | Examiner Staff Writer Follow Him @BrianHughes_ | 06/22/11 8:05 PM

Payouts cost taxpayers millions

Montgomery County's spending on disability pensions has soared past that of rival Fairfax County despite similar-sized police forces and comparably low crime rates.

Since 2004, Montgomery County public safety officials have made 199 disability claims, while Fairfax has handed out 19 such awards,

showcasing the difference in a program costing Montgomery taxpayers millions of dollars instead of hundreds of thousands across the Potomac.

Two tales of disability: Fairfax vs. Montgomery

2000-2008: No Fairfax County cop received a disability pension.

2004-2009: 91 Montgomery County Police officers were given disability retirement. 49 Montgomery firefighters and sheriff's deputies received disability pensions

Two Fairfax County cops received such payments -- both of which came in 2009. Eight "uniformed officers," primarily sheriff's deputies and firefighters, received payments.

2010: 34 Montgomery firefighters were awarded disability or have applications pending, and 25 police officers applied for the perk. One Fairfax cop and eight "uniformed officers" received the award.

Between 2000 and 2009, two Fairfax County police officers received disability pensions, according to records obtained by The Washington Examiner. In comparison, 91 Montgomery County cops were awarded such a perk between 2004 and 2009.

"It's a striking difference," said Montgomery County Councilman Phil Andrews, D-Gaithersburg/Rockville, who is leading efforts to rein in disability spending. "What it suggests is that disability retirement here is used as an alternate retirement system. That's not how it's supposed to work."

And a sharp upsurge in Montgomery disability claims is widening the gap even more.

Last year, 25 Montgomery police officers filed for disability-connected retirement -- virtually all claims are approved -- and 34 firefighters had disability requests approved or pending, which amounts to three-fourths of the total awarded in the department during the previous six years combined.

One Fairfax police officer was given a disability pension last year.

The uptick in Montgomery claims comes as officials are set to dictate payments based on injury severity for county employees. A council panel signed off on legislation effective July 2012 that would develop a two-tiered system, essentially designating full and partial disability.

Currently, officers who break a finger are eligible for the same amount of money as a paralyzed colleague.

The gap in spending between the two suburbs baffles some analysts, but others with years of public safety experience in Montgomery say it represents workers' widespread sense of entitlement.

"Do you have any idea how easy it is to claim disability?" asked one Montgomery police officer who requested anonymity. "It's 'oh my back, oh my knee.' The list goes on and on. Look, it's a culture thing. I hate to say it, but here, too many officers feel that their badge entitles them to a handout once they've 'put in their time.'"

Under current policy, police officers and general government employees are given two-thirds of their annual salary in a tax-free pension. County officials were unable to provide the average cost of disability payments, but a midcareer police officer making \$75,000 a year would expect to take home \$50,000 each year.

The fire department already employs a two-tiered system. Montgomery officials say the county would save \$2.7 million annually if all departments mirrored such a setup.

Fueling the calls for reform, former Inspector General Thomas Dagley found that 60 percent of police officers retired with a disability pension during a recent three-year period. He concluded that "a prudent person would consider [the system] abusive."

However, union officials counter that politicians are distorting the extent of claims, which they argue are approved by impartial medical professionals.

"Enough is enough," said Fraternal Order of Police President Marc Zifcak, labeling the crackdown an attack on public employees that comes on the heels of benefits reductions.

Critics say Fairfax County's disability totals are so low because they keep employees on the payroll too long, costing taxpayers more when they claim full retirement benefits.

More than 90 percent of Montgomery disability requests are approved, county records show, even though dozens of employees collect disability checks while working elsewhere.

"I'm continually shocked by the sweetheart deals that were made in the past that we are now reaping the whirlwind," said Joan Fidler, president of the Montgomery County Taxpayers League,

who was part of a county-appointed commission to study the arrangement. "The taxpayer is being abused here. The rules in place allow them to do it, and they certainly take advantage of it."