



## Taxpayers pay \$14 million in bonus benefits for county employees

Posted By: Mike Deeson ■ Date last updated: 6/12/2009 4:43:54 AM

[Smaller](#)   [Larger](#)   [Print Article](#)   [Close Page](#)



Hillsborough taxpayers are funding almost \$14 million in bonus benefits for county workers -- at the same time programs are being cut and people are losing their jobs

Tampa, Florida -- Governments in Florida are facing a major crisis because there is not enough money to cover the services that taxpayers are used to receiving. Workers are losing their jobs, being forced to take furloughs or pay cuts.

In the latest round of cutbacks animal cruelty investigators are targeted for layoffs. Animal Control director Bill Armstrong says if someone had told him a year ago something like this would happen he would have said they were crazy.

After school programs are being cut and people are pleading with Hillsborough commissioners to spare their programs. Eleven-year old Robert Valiente is asking commissioners to keep his after school program alive.

But while programs are being cut, the county continues to spend millions on health insurance for county employees.

Hillsborough benefits manager Christina Swanson acknowledges health insurance is expensive and health costs are expensive as well.

It's not unusual for an employer to pick up a good portion of medical coverage for employees, but what is unusual is the county also has what's called "Cafeteria Benefits", which give employees an extra \$210 a month.

Swanson says it is to help defer the cost of health benefits for County employees.

They call it a cafeteria plan, because each month, when a county employee gets \$210, they can choose to spend it on the items they like -- sort of like in a cafeteria. For example, an employee can spend \$100 to supplement the cost of their health care, another \$100 on dental, and \$10 on vision. Or, if they want, they can take the \$210 that taxpayers give them and put it in their pocket -- to spend it any way they want.

The extra \$210 adds up, costing the county \$1,155,000 a month and \$13,860,000 a year. And that extra cost is in addition to the millions the county spends on more traditional health care benefits.

The county pays \$1,080 to cover insurance costs for every family plan. The employee has to contribute \$245, but then the county gives them that \$210 in Cafeteria Benefits. We asked Swanson if the county can afford to continue these benefits.

County Commissioner Mark Sharp says the county can not afford programs like this. Sharpe says government can no longer afford all the benefits and entitlements it has given in the past.

Others in government agencies agree. Hillsborough Tax Collector Doug Belden ended the program in his office. Belden said it was no longer affordable. However, county employees don't want to give up the benefits, which upset taxpayers like Alan Swartz. Swartz says everybody is trying to cut back. He says people are having a hard time paying their taxes and it makes it even harder when additional dollars come out of the budget.

And as the county looks for ways to preserve programs and jobs in these tough economic times, some say there are 13,860,000 reasons the Cafeteria Benefits should be put on a tray and dumped into the garbage.

Mike Deeson, 10 Connects