

## **VILLAGE OF NORTH PALM BEACH HIGHER EDUCATION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM**

The Village of North Palm Beach encourages employees to voluntarily pursue training programs, undergraduate and graduate degrees or professional certifications that will improve and enhance their skills, performance, and ability to assume additional responsibilities at the Village. Accordingly, subject to budgetary restraints, the Village will provide educational assistance to eligible employees who are seeking a qualifying undergraduate or graduate degree or professional certification, or who are obtaining job-related training. Assistances and other payments made by the Village to an eligible employee under this policy are subject to the current federal taxation requirements.

### **EMPLOYEE ELIGIBILITY**

To be eligible, employees must be employed by the Village on a full-time basis for at least one year (12 months) of continuous service in an active status (not on a leave of absence) and must be in good standing at the time of application for assistance and on the date of the assistance payment by the Village. For purposes of this policy, the Village defines “good standing” as an employee who has not received any corrective action or other formal discipline, performance improvement plan or an unsatisfactory performance evaluation within the last 6 months. Employees must also be currently employed at the time that payment is made. All said employees are eligible unless superseded by a current Collective Bargaining Agreement.

### **UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE PROGRAMS**

Course Eligibility: Undergraduate and graduate courses must be taken as part of a degree program approved in advance by the Department Director, Human Resources Director, and the Village Manager, and must provide an eligible employee with skills, knowledge or competencies applicable to the employee’s current position or another position at the Village. The courses must be provided by an accredited university or college.

Grade Requirements: An employee must maintain a “C” average or above to maintain eligibility in the Village’s program after completion of the first semester of classes.

Tuition Assistance Provisions: An employee is eligible to receive assistance for two (2) classes per semester for a maximum of five (5) classes per fiscal year. The amount of assistance approved by the Village will be based on the employee’s grade in each course, as provided in this policy.

Books, and required laboratory fees are eligible for assistance, but shall be limited to \$250 per fiscal year. All other expenses, including but not limited to, those for parking, supplies or non-laboratory fees, are the employee’s responsibility and are not eligible for assistance from the Village.

Assistance Amount: The assistance amount will be limited to actual tuition, or the per credit rate of the established Florida resident credit hour rate for undergraduate or graduate courses charged in the State of Florida university system at the time of the employee’s course enrollment, whichever is lower, regardless of the employee’s election to attend a private

educational institution. Upon the employee's completion of an approved course, the assistance schedule will be based on grades received by the employee as follows: 100% assistance for a grade of "A", or "Pass" (for Pass/Fail course only); 100% assistance for a grade of "B" and 75% assistance for a grade of "C". The Village will not provide any amount of tuition assistance if the employee earns a grade of "D" or "F" or receives a "Fail" or "Incomplete" mark.

Courses must be scheduled outside of the employee's regular work hours and all homework or related coursework must be done outside of working hours. Employees are prohibited from using Village equipment or resources to engage in homework or other related coursework.

*NOTE: The Village may reduce the percentage of assistance if the combined total of the employee's financial assistance and the Village's assistance to the employee exceeds 100% of the tuition, book costs and laboratory fees for the course term.*

## **CERTIFICATION OR TRAINING PROGRAMS**

**Program Eligibility:** An eligible employee may obtain assistance for a certification program or courses in a professional discipline applicable to the employee's current position or another position at the Village and for job-related training courses or programs (collectively referred to as "certification or training programs"). The certification or training programs must be provided by an accredited university or college, professional association, professional training provider, or other similar institution. The employee's participation in any certification or training program must be approved in advance by the Department Director, Human Resources Director, and the Village Manager.

This policy only applies to certification or training programs that cost \$1,200.00 or more, inclusive of registration and attendance fees and related expenses, such as travel, lodging and food.

**Tuition Assistance Provisions:** An employee is eligible to receive assistance for up to two (2) certification or training programs per semester. If the certification or training program consists of courses or sessions that occur over a period of time, similar to the semester-based system for undergraduate or graduate degree programs, the Village will follow the "Tuition Assistance Provisions" contained in the Undergraduate and Graduate Programs section of this policy.

**Assistance Amount:** The assistance amount will be determined by the Village at the time of approval on an individual employee basis, in consideration of the nature of the certification or training program, the employee's position, the Village's operational needs, and the tuition, attendance or registration costs and the related expenses, such as travel, lodging and food. Any amount paid by the Village in connection with a Village approved training program shall not exceed the reimbursable travel expenses authorized under Section 112.061, Florida Statutes. The Village will provide assistance to an eligible employee who successfully completes the approved certification or training course or program, up to a maximum of \$5,250.00 per fiscal year based on the date of the check to the employee. The Village will not provide any assistance to an employee who does not successfully complete the certification or training course or program.

## **APPROVAL PROCEDURE**

Eligible employees must receive prior approval from the Village Manager in writing to participate in the Village's educational assistance program. To obtain approval, an eligible employee must submit a completed Education Assistance Program Participation form to his or her Department Head with the following documents attached: the course or program description; an agenda or schedule (with dates and times); and for training or certification programs only, the program cost and a list of the categories and costs of any related expenses.

The Department Head and the Human Resources Director will review the employee's form and supporting documentation to determine if the employee meets the criteria for participation in the Village's Educational Assistance Program. If the employee is eligible to participate in the program, the Village Manager will evaluate and either grant or deny the employee's request. Notice of the Village Manager's decision shall be provided to the employee in writing.

## **PROGRAM TERMS**

The assistance amounts provided to eligible employees by the Village are considered a loan for educational expenses. Accordingly, if the employee is approved to participate in the Village's educational assistance program, the employee is required to remain employed with the Village in a full-time capacity for a continuous 12 month period from the date of each assistance payment received by the employee or on the date that the Employee completes the undergraduate or graduate course or the certification or training program, whichever is later.

If the employee completes the 12 month period of employment, the Village will forgive the loan for that 12 month period. However, if the employee resigns or terminates employment at any time during the 12 month employment period (for any reason other than due to a reduction in force or due to circumstances beyond the employee's control, as determined by the Village Manager), the Village will forgive the loan on a pro rata basis. The prorated amount will be calculated as follows: the total assistance amount in the prior 12 month period divided by the number of months of the employment period completed by the employee. The balance of the loan not forgiven under this policy is due in full within seven (7) days of the employee's separation from employment. In appropriate circumstances, the Village and employee may agree to a monthly payment plan for repayment of the balance of the loan.

The Village also may retain and deduct the amount owed under this Policy (in whole or in part) from any monies due to the employee prior to or following his or her termination, subject to the applicable restrictions imposed by the Fair Labor Standards Act. The employee will submit a signed, notarized promissory note guaranteeing full repayment for all education expenses if the terms of this policy are not fulfilled on the side of the employee, which shall include an express lien on all wages or other payments due the employee in accordance with applicable laws.

An eligible employee who receives assistance to attend a basic recruit training program for law enforcement officers is required to comply with the employment and repayment terms provided in Florida Statutes section 943.16, which includes a two-year employment commitment from the employee to avoid the repayment provisions.

*NOTE: An employee who participates in the Village's educational assistance program is employed at will and the employee's employment may be terminated by the employee or the Village at any time, with or without cause or prior notice. This policy does not create a contractual relationship between the Village and any employee participating in the Village's educational assistance program, and does not create a guarantee of employment for a definite period of time or for any purpose.*

## **PAYMENT AND ASSISTANCE PROCEDURE**

If approved to participate in the Village's educational assistance program, the employee shall submit proof of cost of his or her tuition, laboratory fees, registration and attendance costs, and related expenses. If the documents produced by the employee are satisfactory, the Department Head will complete a Personnel Action Form (PAF) indicating approval to proceed with assistance. The PAF form must be submitted to the Human Resources Director and then forwarded to the Village Manager for final approval. If approved, the PAF will be submitted to payroll for processing. The employee will then submit a signed, notarized promissory note to the Village guaranteeing full repayment for all education expenses if the terms of this policy are not fulfilled on the side of the employee. The signed promissory note must be received by the Village prior to any payment being made.

Within thirty (30) calendar days of successful completion of the approved course(s), program or training, the employee must provide to his or her Department Head copies of all receipts for all additional eligible costs and fees and one of the following: certified transcript for the course term for any undergraduate and graduate courses, copy of professional certification, or a certificate of completion for a training program. The employee shall also disclose and provide documents showing all financial assistance (including, but not limited to, scholarships, grants, stipends, waivers, discounts, fellowships, military and veterans' benefits) and other non-refundable financial assistance received by the employee used to pay tuition or other costs. The combined total of the employee's financial assistance and the Village's assistance to the employee shall not exceed 100% of the tuition and eligible costs and fees. The assistance amount may be reduced to satisfy this rule.

## **TERMINATION FROM EMPLOYMENT**

If the employee resigns, submits a resignation, or is terminated by the Village for any reason other than due to a reduction in force or due to circumstances beyond the employee's control (as determined by the Village Manager), prior to receiving assistance for a completed course(s) or program, the Village (at the Village Manager's Discretion) may forgive the loan on a pro rata basis. If an employee is laid off from employment with the Village, the employee will be eligible for assistance of approved undergraduate or graduate courses in which the employee is enrolled at the time of layoff. Assistance will be determined in accordance with this policy.

## **MISCELLANEOUS**

At the Village's discretion, the Village Manager may approve exceptions and/or change the provisions of this policy at any time, including the eligibility and assistance criteria and the assistance amount. The employee's assistance request will be processed in accordance with the policy in effect at the time of the request, not the time of the employee's enrollment in the undergraduate or graduate course, or certification or training program.