

What's Wrong With a BSL4 Bioterrorism Laboratory at Boston Medical Center?

A coalition of residents, community and advocacy groups, elected officials, scientists, and others oppose Boston University's proposal to construct a bioterrorism laboratory with a Bio-Safety Level 4 (BSL4) component near Boston Medical Center. Their reasons include:

The Health and Safety Risks Are Serious

Biodefense research in the U.S. often involves the study, and sometimes the weaponization, of the most lethal pathogens known. Although authorities insist that such research is conducted under the strictest security, mistakes are inevitable and occur. (E.g., an accidental aerosol release from a Soviet bioresearch facility caused an anthrax epidemic and human fatalities.)

The lab will use sophisticated technologies and procedures to decrease the risk of an accidental or intentional release of pathogens and to prevent a release resulting from a terrorist attack, but as we have seen in many other instances, accidents occur, sophisticated technologies are imperfect and fail, and some people have nefarious motives. Releases could occur by many means, including a breach of the containment system, infections of workers, escape of infected research animals, or while the viruses are being transported to the lab. The consequences could be deadly if there were a release of even a small amount of pathogens from the lab into the nearby densely populated neighborhood. More than 50,000 people live within one mile of the project site and more than one million people within ten miles.

The lab would be a potential target for terrorists, who might view the lab as a source of bioweapons materials or a facility to destroy. An attack on, or infiltration of, the lab could result in the release of pathogens or the escape of infected laboratory animals. An attack on the lab that did not release pathogens would likely cause damage in the nearby community.

BU Refuses to Provide Information

BU waited more than a year to release an edited copy of its application for federal funding and refuses to provide any other documentation to support its claims. Instead, BU provides misinformation and refuses to engage in a real dialogue with community opponents of the lab.

No Public Right to Know

The lab may not operate in an open and transparent manner. For 20 years, the federal government can mandate the research to be conducted in the lab and require classified research, preventing local oversight and threatening the integrity of academic research. Federal laws on bioterrorism may prevent or delay notice of the public in the event of a release.

Not In a Residential Neighborhood

The lab will have a high-security perimeter with armed guards, high fences, and nighttime lighting, which are incompatible with the nearby neighborhood, medical campus, and hospital that is the primary provider of free care in Boston. The proposed 1,400 car parking garage will cause an increase in traffic and air pollution.

Few Decent Jobs for Community Residents

Biomedical research facilities do not generate many jobs for those without a college degree and the few that they do generate tend to have no career ladders. BU has refused to provide an analysis of the number, educational and training requirements, and types of jobs to be created.

Gentrification and Job Loss

The South End has already undergone the displacement of many of its lower income residents; many are people of color. If the lab generates economic change in the area, there are no plans to prevent further housing displacement or to protect the 15,000 blue collar jobs in the area from losing out to higher real estate prices and speculators.

Waste Of Money / Misplaced Priorities

The federal government has pumped billions of dollars into biodefense at the expense of funding programs for public health, schools, housing, and other basic services. There are other BSL4 labs in the country and some experts believe that there is no need to sprinkle more BSL4 labs throughout the country, but neither the federal government nor BU have an interest in allowing a debate about bioweapons labs to occur.

More Information

For more information, including a report on BU's campaign of misinformation, and how to get involved in opposition to the lab, please visit www.ace-ej.org or call 617-442-3343.