



**ACE**  
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# Safety Net CRG

## Media Release

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## Community Opposes Boston University's Proposed Biodefense Lab

*Concerns raised over potential accidents, lack of public process*

[Boston, MA] When Boston University Medical Center announced earlier this year their proposal to build a high security biodefense research lab in the South End, concerned residents began asking questions about its potential risks. With many concerns left unanswered, a coalition of community groups, elected officials, and others are now trying to put a stop to the process. Today, in a letter sent to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the coalition requested that the federal government disqualify BU's proposal for grant funds to build the facility until the university provides full information and a meaningful public review process. They also announced that much of the research proposed for the lab could be prohibited under a 1994 Boston public health regulation and are calling on the Boston Public Health Commission (BPHC) to enforce its own ban.

BU is among a number of universities competing for research and construction funds that could amount to \$1.6 billion in the coming years. There are currently only five Biosafety Level 4 labs in the US. NIH will fund the construction of two more. These are the highest security research labs that study the most dangerous biological weapons agents, including anthrax, smallpox, and the plague.

"A release, accidental or intentional, of any of these diseases with no known cure could put at risk the more than 25,000 people living within a mile of the proposed lab and the million within 10 miles," said Donovan Walker, a member of the Roxbury Safety Net, one of the groups leading the coalition. On March 20<sup>th</sup>, a package of West Nile Virus exploded at a Federal Express building in Columbus Ohio. The anthrax used in the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> mail attacks was traced back to one of the current Biosafety level 4 labs in Fort Detrick, Maryland.

Requests for BU to release details of their proposal have been turned down. "BU claims that they have been making a good faith effort to reach community groups and that they have fifty letters of support, but have made none of these available to the public," said Sujatha Byravan, Director of the Council for

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Responsible Genetics. According to Lucky Devlin of the South Boston Environmental Healthwatch, "When I went to a meeting held by BU in May, it was the first that I or any of my neighbors had heard about the proposal." The coalition's letter to NIH states that, "Many community members in attendance felt that he was condescending and defensive, particularly to residents without advanced degrees." Klare Allen of Alternatives for Community & Environment, said that "This proposal is another example of environmental racism on a community of color. If this was an affluent white community, public meetings would have been held and respect given to the community."

The secrecy surrounding the details of the facility make coalition members even more nervous. "Is this facility going to do research to protect us, or will it develop new bioweapons? Without any details, we have no way of making an informed judgment. Instead of making us safer, the presence of such a facility could make us more of a target for terrorist attacks," said Byravan.

According to ACE Staff Attorney Gene Benson, "Much of the research that would presumably be carried out at the proposed facility is banned under Boston health regulations. We call upon the Mayor and the Health Commission to stand by their own regulations." These regulations on Recombinant DNA Technology were passed in 1994 by the former Board of Health and Hospitals and are now enforceable by the Boston Public Commission. Section 3.01 states that "RDNA use requiring containment defined by the Guidelines as 'BL4' shall not be permitted in the City of Boston."

The coalition is also working with City Councilor Chuck Turner, who has proposed a City Ordinance to ban all activities involving Biosafety Lab 4 research. "Passage of this ordinance is the only way to protect residents from the dangers of research with some of the most dangerous viruses in the world, some of which have no known cures," said Turner. City of Cambridge has a current ban on BSL4 activities involving recombinant DNA.

The coalition further opposes this type of development because they do not believe that it will generate significant economic opportunities. "For two years now, we have already been fighting against proposals for biotech research in this area because it would not create job opportunities for existing residents. Now with this proposal, in addition to having an advanced degree, you also need a top-level security clearance just to get in the door. We doubt that there will be any economic benefits for the surrounding community," said Walker.

It was recently reported in the *Sacramento Bee* that four applicants are still in the running for the NIH funds, including the University of California Davis, University of Illinois Chicago, University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, and the New York Department of Public Health. Boston University would not confirm whether they had become a finalist and calls to NIH have not been returned.

The coalition is lead by the Alternatives for Community & Environment (ACE), Safety Net, and the Council for Responsible Genetics (CRG). ACE is a Roxbury-based environmental justice group working to build the power of lower income communities and communities of color to promote healthy, sustainable, and equitable communities ([www.ace-ej.org](http://www.ace-ej.org)). Safety Net, an organizing project of ACE, brings together Roxbury residents to advocate for sustainable and equitable development. Cambridge-based CRG fosters public debate about the social, ethical and environmental implications of genetic technologies ([www.gene-watch.org](http://www.gene-watch.org)).

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