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Booster efforts pay off for city

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By **WILLIAM FREEBAIRN**
wfreebairn@repub.com

SPRINGFIELD - A \$4.9 million federal contract for biomedical research in Springfield is a sign that the city's efforts to boost the industry is paying off, officials said.

"The contract can act as a catalyst and as a magnet for improvement," said Dr. Paul Friedmann, executive director of the Pioneer Valley Life Sciences Institute in Springfield.

BioMedical Research Models Inc. of Worcester formally announced yesterday that it landed the contract from the National Institutes of Diabetes, Digestive and Kidney Diseases. The company will perform testing of compounds that could treat Type 1 diabetes.

The successful bid was made in conjunction with the Pioneer Valley Life Sciences Institute, a partnership between Baystate Medical Center in Springfield and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

BioMedical Research Models is a tenant in the Pioneer Valley Life Sciences Institute facility on Main Street in Springfield.

"The rationale, from the hospital's point of view, was not just to lease space, it was to coordinate research," said Friedmann in an interview yesterday. The Institute plans to add researchers with a focus on diabetes in the coming months, Friedmann said.

"It's a good strategic alliance," said Dennis L. Guberski, president of BioMedical Research Models and a Chicopee native.

BioMedical Research Models, which has special lines of rodents used to study certain types of disease, won the federal contract over several larger institutions, officials said.

In a statement yesterday, U.S. Rep. Richard E. Neal, D-Springfield, said the contract could bring high-paying jobs into the area. BioMedical Research Models has the equivalent of 9 full-time employees in Springfield. Employment at the company will grow by six to 10 people over the next several years.

The Springfield office of BioMedical Research Models should perform 75 to 85 percent of the work from the contract, Guberski said.

The award is part of increased focus on diabetes by the federal government in recent years, Guberski said. Cases of diabetes are on the rise, he said.

The new center being established under the contract will test compounds that can keep those diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes disease from reaching the stage of the disease where they rely on external insulin, Guberski.

The company and its partners will design animal tests to review the value of treatments developed by third party companies and submitted to the government. If the treatment shows hope, it can proceed to human clinical trials.

Ellen Bemben, president of the nonprofit Regional Technology Corp. in Springfield, said the deal lends credibility to regional efforts to promote life science research in Western Massachusetts. "It directly affects us in a very, very positive manner," she said.

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