

Dallas' federal biotech hub targets first mission: untangling clinical trial pipeline

The federal biotech agency launched its customer experience hub at Pegasus Park on Thursday, one of three headquarters across the country.



Renee Wegrzyn, director of the Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health (ARPA-H), speaks during an event to celebrate the launch of the customer experience hub of ARPA-H in Texas, Thursday, Oct. 19, 2023, in Dallas

What if nine in 10 Americans could participate in a clinical trial within a half hour of their home? That's the first challenge Dallas' [new federal biotechnology hub](#) will tackle, the Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health, known as ARPA-H, announced at the hub's launch Thursday.

The Advancing Clinical Trial Readiness Initiative, called ACTR, aims to bring decentralized medical trials closer to patients in order to increase access to new therapies and diversify biotechnology research. The initiative will live in ARPA-H's customer experience hub, which is made up of a consortium of Texas cities and headquartered at Dallas' Pegasus Park.

Texas won the customer experience hub in large part because of its broad and well-connected web of academic institutions, industries and different patient populations, which the initiative plans to tap as it collects insights into how clinical trials must improve to become more accessible.

“We can currently take a tumor, look at hundreds of thousands of its cells and understand their behaviors, their genetic makeup, but we still can’t map patients to the right clinical trials in a way that’s easy for families and patients,” said ARPA-H program manager Andrea Bild. “I think this initiative at ARPA-H in general really seeks to solve these previously untenable but really impactful problems.”

Science advocates [worked for two years to secure one of ARPA-H’s three headquarters](#) in Texas. Only two weeks after being named a hub site alongside Cambridge, Mass., and Washington, D.C., agency staff are officially moving into their new home.

The Cambridge and Washington hubs will specialize in catalyzing investment and partnerships, respectively.



Nicole Small, CEO of Lyda Hill Philanthropies, left, speaks during an event to celebrate the launch of the customer experience hub of the Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health (ARPA-H) in Texas, Thursday, Oct. 19, 2023, in Dallas.

Spoke sites, through a model called ARPANET-H, will include hospitals, health systems and universities across the country.

For the next two months, ACTR organizers will collect feedback from ARPA-H's network on the challenges facing the current clinical trial system. The initiative will then provide funding to pitches on how to fix those problems.

“This is an ambitious goal. There's not going to be one solution that gets us there,” said ARPA-H director Renee Wegrzyn. “But we're ready to really lean into the ARPANET and try to bring together communities to help us move toward that goal.”

Thursday's launch event featured dozens of key players, local politicians and scientists from universities like the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center. Community members also joined the event, including one mom who shared that she had to turn to social media to find clinical trials when her son needed breakthrough treatment.

While science and technology have made monumental leaps in recent decades, the clinical trial pipeline largely has not, said Dr. Eric Peterson, vice provost and senior associate dean for clinical research at UT Southwestern.

“We still do studies very much like I did as I ... began in my field, putting posters on the walls to try to get interest in our studies, enrolling one patient per site per month,” Peterson said. “We made studies too slow, too complex, too costly, and ultimately not representative of the population.”

Congress appropriated \$2.5 billion to launch ARPA-H and fund high-risk-high-reward research. The agency spent almost \$1 billion last year, with most of that money going toward research and development, Wegrzyn said. A few weeks ago, ARPA-H awarded [\\$45 million to a team led by cancer researchers at Houston's Rice University](#).

Funding allocated to ideas that come out of the clinical trial initiative has not yet been determined.