ML STRATEGIES

Massachusetts for ARPA-H

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The Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health (ARPA-H) is now a reality. President Biden first pitched the concept in his first address to a joint session of Congress just over a year ago. In March, ARPA-H came to fruition when Congress included $1 billion in the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2022 to establish the agency. There was and remains significant disagreement in Washington about where in the bureaucracy ARPA-H should be organized, with many believing having the National Institutes of Health as a parent will slow the agency down. The compromise achieved by Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra seems to include physically separating the new agency from NIH headquarters in Bethesda by siting ARPA-H well outside the Washington beltway. The jockeying has already begun. In fact, before the ink of the president's signature was even dry, cities and states were advocating to host the federal government's newest agency. Among the regions with the most compelling case to make is the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Modeled after the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and the Advanced Research Projects Agency-Energy (ARPA-E), ARPA-H is designed to give the federal government an added ability to accelerate biomedical research and development. To keep the United States at the forefront of innovations that prevent, treat, and even cure disease, ARPA-H is tasked with making high-risk, high-reward investments in health research. Given Massachusetts' track record in such breakthroughs, and the environment of collaboration between the state's world-class universities, academic research hospitals, other providers, and life science industries, the Bay State is a natural fit.

Massachusetts is already home to a successful state quasi-governmental agency, the Massachusetts Life Sciences Center (MLSC), the mission of which complements ARPA-H. Using state funding, MLSC makes local investments in promising science to help accelerate commercialization of treatments, therapies, and cures. Ideas sparked in any of the research institutions which dot the state are candidates for MLSC funding. When concepts become businesses, those companies tend to set up facilities locally, drawing on the state's advanced manufacturing workforce as well as engineers and scientists to help scale operations. Regional associations including the Massachusetts Medical Device Industry Council (MassMEDIC) and the Massachusetts Biotechnology Council (MassBio) bring these companies together to collaborate and advocate. Finally, Boston's venture capital firms play a critical role in getting companies to the next level. Look no further than the critical importance of mRNA vaccines addressing the COVID-19 pandemic for proof of Massachusetts' ability to solve difficult public health problems with its cooperative approach.

Although the process for landing ARPA-H remains unclear, cities, regions, and states from coast to coast are getting ready to make their pitch. Southern California, home to Secretary Becerra, is a contender. The San Francisco Bay Area, with its powerful congressional delegation, will make a strong case, too. Gov. Gavin Newsome may be faced with a tough choice when it comes time to weigh in with the White House. Even Texas, with the support of Gov. Greg Abbott, is mounting a campaign, though it will likely face strong political headwinds.

Conversations have begun in Massachusetts and among the state's elected representatives in Washington. Given the competition, though, a successful bid will require a concerted effort and significant political capital. The prize is worthwhile. APRA-H has the potential to turbocharge the development of treatments and therapies that could change the course of human history. Like NASA in Houston, a federal office like ARPA-H will make a tremendous local impact to its host region.

The author is actively working to pull together a coalition of stakeholders to coordinate advocacy efforts. Contact Anthony if you are interested in participating. AMDeMaio@MLStrategies.com

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