

Life sciences need cultivation

BY SAM LATHEM

Researchers in Newark just announced a remarkable breakthrough -- the creation of a fully automated, scalable "factory" that can produce plant-based vaccines in just weeks.

This invention could revolutionize the treatment of future pandemics. And it's yet more evidence that the biotech industry has found a stable home in Delaware.

Delaware has long been a leader in innovation. After the Revolutionary War, technological improvements in the flour mill industry helped turn Delaware's economy around. In the 1800s, advances in machinery brought the paper industry to the United States from overseas -- and it found a home in Delaware.

Innovative industries have supported many jobs here, as well. During the Second World War, Delaware's work force helped build ships and railroad cars. And in the 1950s, car plants opened up, employing thousands of citizens.

Most of these manufacturing jobs have dried up, of course. Over the last two years, both General Motors and Chrysler have left our state. In March, the Valero Refinery closed its doors. Delaware's unemployment now stands at 9.3 percent.

The life sciences industry, though, is still strong. And it could help provide the steady, rewarding work -- particularly the high-skilled union jobs -- that so many folks in Delaware need.

Already, Delaware's biotech companies employ 11,000 people. These aren't just scientists. Biotech firms employ food workers, electricians, tech support staff, accountants, groundskeepers, and countless others.

These firms also support jobs in other industries. Biotech factories are built by construction workers and engineers, many of whom are members of unions.

Local restaurants are kept in business by biotech employees. In fact, it's estimated that

the use of asthma medicines led to a 91 percent decline in expensive emergency room visits.

The success of Delaware's biotech industry, though, isn't guaranteed. Nearby states like Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania are working hard to attract biotech firms. And there's always the threat of American firms closing up shop and moving overseas. Our political leaders -- both in Dover and Washington -- must recognize these threats and support policies that shore up our biotech industry.

For starters, Delaware lawmakers should make sure it's easy for biotech companies to set up shop here in Delaware. Legislators should also support policies that help biotech companies attract venture capital.

In Washington, representatives must make sure the United States remains competitive by supporting strong intellectual property laws.

And in both Washington and Dover, lawmakers must recognize the importance of preparing today's students to be tomorrow's researchers. Teachers must have the resources they need to help our students achieve a strong foundation in math and science.

Delaware's biotech industry already provides thousands of jobs for state residents. By making sure the right policies are in place, lawmakers can ensure that this industry continues to thrive.

Sam Lathem is the president of the Delaware State AFL-CIO.

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Delaware's biotech industry indirectly supports 16,000 jobs.

Our state's biotech firms are doing amazing work. Syngenta, a young company in Wilmington, has already emerged as a world leader in the agrichemical development.

Incyte, a firm that's also based in Wilmington, is close to bringing a cutting-edge blood disorder medicine to market. Other firms are researching cures for cancer and AIDS.

This type of innovation can help the economy by lowering health care costs. A recent study in Pediatrics found that a 47 percent increase in