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### **Ten Years after Anthrax Attacks, Public Health Laboratory System Eroding due to Funding Cuts**

Silver Spring, MD – On the tenth anniversary of the anthrax attacks that followed 9/11, the US laboratory network that tested over 125,000 samples for the deadly bacterium is eroding. Proud of the thorough and rapid response of its members, the Association of Public Health Laboratories (APHL) is now concerned that investment in laboratory capacity could hinder a similar response during a future crisis.

A paper released today by APHL traces the evolution of the Laboratory Response Network (LRN) as the nation's system for laboratory response to all hazards and its declining capacity as a result of funding cuts. Becoming operational in August 1999, the LRN – a multi-tiered network of laboratories with standardized protocols for handling and testing potential agents of terrorism – was established by APHL, CDC and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. When a real threat presented itself on September 11, 2001, the LRN went into a high state of alert. That threat became even more real on October 2<sup>nd</sup> of that year when a possible case of inhalational anthrax was found in Florida.

The major source of federal preparedness funding for the labs that make up the LRN, the Public Health Emergency Preparedness (PHEP) Cooperative Agreement, has been cut by one-third since its peak in the years following the anthrax attacks (nearly \$1 billion to approximately \$632 million). The current House of Representatives' version of the Pandemic and All Hazard Preparedness Act would set funding at \$632 million for the next five years. Other grants and cooperative agreements that fund laboratory preparedness also face cuts.

“The whole infrastructure is being eroded,” said Eric Blank, DrPH, whose historical perspective stretches back nearly 40 years as former head of the Missouri State Public Health Laboratory and APHL's current director of public health systems.

He continued, “I quite frankly—and this is my personal opinion—I'm really worried about the next pandemic or the next emergency situation. And here's why: The public health laboratory community will do everything it can to respond. But, we saw hints of cracks

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even in our H1N1 response, which was a good response. And the next time, when we don't have all our tools and all our staff and all our capabilities, we're not going to be able to do it."

Public health laboratories perform emergency testing routinely. Between August 10, 2009 and August 9, 2010, the 51 state and DC laboratories received nearly 3,500 samples suspected of contamination with biological, chemical or radiological threat agents. There were more than 500 threat letters alone. And yet public health laboratories are on the cusp of losing the infrastructure that enables this work.

*The Association of Public Health Laboratories is a national non-profit located in Silver Spring, MD, that is dedicated to working with members to strengthen governmental laboratories with a public health mandate. By promoting effective programs and public policy, APHL strives to provide public health laboratories with the resources and infrastructure needed to protect the health of US residents and to prevent and control disease globally.*

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