

# A Bright New Day for Erie County Public Health Laboratories: After Risk of Closure, Laboratory Has Plans for Expanded Testing Programs

## Director

Since 1994, the Erie County Laboratories have been headed by Scott Zimmerman, DrPH, MPH, HCLD, the former vice president for analytical services of a medical device manufacturer. Zimmerman said his private sector experience instilled in him a business perspective on finance and budgeting that has led the laboratory to develop a “fairly strong” fee-for-service program that now generates about 55% of the laboratory’s revenue. However, he has no wish to return to the world of commerce. “My goal,” he said, “has always been to be in a public health laboratory.”

## Location

About 16 miles from Niagara Falls and three miles from downtown Buffalo on the campus of the Erie County Medical Center. The site is strategic to the main thoroughfares of upstate New York. Said Zimmerman, as a regional laboratory, “access is really important. People don’t have to drive into downtown Buffalo to get to us.”

## Facility

The laboratory occupies two one-story, 1960s-era cinderblock buildings that underwent a multi-million dollar renovation when the laboratory relocated from a site in downtown Buffalo in 1999. Altogether the state-of-the-art facilities take up 25,000 square-feet, including about 1,500 square-feet of BSL-3 space. Heliport access is an added feature.

## # Staff

30—up from 17 in the mid-1990s.

## Distinguishing Characteristics

- ▶ Largest local public health laboratory in the state outside of New York City.
- ▶ A member of the Laboratory Response Network (LRN) since 2004.
- ▶ First public health lab in upstate New York to perform both clinical and environmental lead testing (in 1970).
- ▶ Piloted the PKU Guthrie bacterial inhibition assay in the 1960s as a newborn screening tool. At that time, the assay—developed by Robert Guthrie at SUNY-Buffalo—was the state-of-the-

art test for PKU screening in infants. “A great example of how public health laboratories have been instrumental in the development and validation of new assays.”

- ▶ The laboratory’s local watershed surveys prompted a statewide ban on the use of phosphates in detergents in the mid-1970s.

- ▶ Located just 16 miles from the infamous Love Canal, the laboratory was very active in Superfund testing in the 1970s and 1980s and continue to perform landfill testing today.

## Highest Volume Testing

About 40% of the laboratory’s workload is dedicated to regional STD control programs, with an emphasis on gonorrhea and chlamydia (about 125 specimens/day) and an aggressive program for viral hepatitis. Next in line is lead testing (about 80-100 samples/day).

## Notable Success Stories:

**Conversion in the mid-1990s** from a *county* to a *regional* laboratory, serving about a third of upstate New York. When Zimmerman first came on board he said, “We just didn’t have sufficient volume to do routine testing. Weeks might go by before we ran a batch of hepatitis tests, for example. The lab was teetering on the verge of shutdown.” Zimmerman turned to his public health partners—including local health agencies and hospitals—to gauge their interest in using his laboratory resources on a fee-for-service basis. The answer was “a resounding *yes*.” Said Zimmerman, “We were able to attain a critical mass (of testing) to increase our efficiency and our proficiency. The more we did something, the better we became at it.”

**Continued survival.** At the end of 2004, the laboratory was almost closed as a result of local funding problems. A combination of several factors—including a written campaign requesting support from laboratory clients, an active staff presence at public legislative hearings, positive media coverage, and communications with state and national health officials—helped the laboratory budget be “reinstated at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour.”

Said Zimmerman, “I’d like to believe that we’re out of the woods on that completely, but we’re probably not.”

**Start-up of an emerging infections and bio-defense laboratory.** The Erie County laboratory has only just recently joined the LRN. But Zimmerman, who is averse to having staff “twiddling their thumbs waiting for a white powder event,” is making his new BSL-3 space do double-duty by using newly trained staff and new technology for “daily public health initiatives,” including testing for SARS, monkeypox and other emerging infectious diseases. “We don’t have regional capacity anywhere else to do that.”

**Becoming a successful training site** for students in the laboratory sciences at SUNY-Buffalo and local colleges, as well as residents in preventive medicine. The Erie County laboratory is the only local public health laboratory that has hosted an APHL Emerging Infectious Disease fellow. “Training has been a really important aspect of what we do. That has been a success story for us.”

## Biggest Challenges

**Funding.** “When public health is doing its job, we tend to be invisible, so we don’t have advocates; people think that we’re not necessary. Our challenge is to market to politicians and their constituents. Public health services like disease surveillance are life insurance policies for the county. Getting that message across is a challenge; there’s no question about that.”

**Staffing.** “The pool of candidates that we have to choose from is dwindling; there are fewer and fewer academic institutions that are putting out laboratory-trained scientists, and it’s very difficult to find laboratorians familiar with molecular methods. We need to figure out where to go to find those folks.”

## # Vacancies: 5

## Goals

*Expand* emerging infections and bio-defense capabilities.

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