The Hinton State Laboratory Institute (HSLI) provides services to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts that are integral to its health and prosperity. The HSLI’s sole purpose is to keep the Commonwealth and her citizens safe from infectious diseases, bioterrorism threats, viral epidemics, foodborne illness, insect-borne diseases, and other biological and chemical toxins. It accomplishes these tasks by maintaining high-quality testing facilities, providing critical resources to health centers, and training health professionals to properly treat diseases and prevent avoidable transmission.

The HSLI line item has seen a 16% decrease in funding over the past five years. This has resulted in a loss of 23 researchers from infectious disease laboratories, significant cutbacks of testing capability within these labs, and substantial reductions in the rapidity with which potential patients are identified and isolated. Hospitals and clinics rely on the HSLI to conduct testing and triage patients who may be suffering from infectious diseases. Continued decreases in allocated funds will eventually force the State Lab to shut down facilities that provide life-saving functions. For diseases like TB, which saw an increase in cases by 10% in 2012, this would mean an avoidable loss of life as well as a large, yet unnecessary cost to the state for each untreated case.

It is for this reason that we propose an increase of $2.6 million to the current allocated budget.

■ The Bill

Line-item 4516-1000: State Laboratory and Communicable Disease Control Services.

■ Excerpt from Storybook

“When I was wandering the halls of the laboratory, I realized that the lab was nothing like the laboratories that I’m use to at Brandeis. Why are they so run down and not state of the art? Employees were telling me about how the power goes out and how the elevators no longer function properly. I had no idea how the only public health laboratory left in Massachusetts... was functioning under such conditions.” When I asked Dr. DeMaria [Alfred DeMaria, MD, Medical Director of the Bureau...
of Infectious Disease at HSLI] about this, he told me the following: “If you have a family and you lose your job and money is tight, you’re going to spend the money to feed the family and heat the house first. Same thing happens here. You’re not going to spend the money on day-to-day things – that’s where you take the cuts: things you can get away with in the short term. But in the long term, you suffer for that because you do not have the kind of facility that can do the work more efficiently and effectively and you suffer in terms of employee morale and productivity.”

■ Elevator Speech

Hello, my name is Jonathan and this is my colleague Matthew. I am a registered Massachusetts voter, and we are both students at Brandeis University, a school known for its deep engagement with real world public policy issues. We are working with the Medical Advisory Committee for the Elimination of Tuberculosis to increase funding for the Hinton State Laboratory Institute. The State Lab is an often taken-for-granted hidden gem that is responsible for maintaining the health and safety of the Commonwealth. Working behind the scenes, it functions like a weather forecast, except for dangerous hazards like anthrax, tuberculosis, diseased water, and poisoned food. But unlike a weather forecast, the State Lab can do more than just warn us about these threats. It can help to contain their spread, and prevent them from affecting our lives. Consequently, if the institute is doing its job effectively, you wouldn’t even know it. However, the institute has seen its funding cut by 16% and its staff reduced by 18% over the past six years. The State Lab can’t function as well with such limited resources, and it is the Commonwealth that will pay. We are inching closer and closer towards a public health crisis that could incapacitate our healthcare system, and cost the state billions of dollars. We are asking you to co-sign an amendment to increase funding for the institute by $2.6 million. Among other things, this additional money would go towards creating a special team of community health workers who are specifically trained to work with ethnically diverse populations that are at significantly increased risk for diseases like HIV, tuberculosis, syphilis, arboviruses, and EEE. The State Lab keeps us safe from dangerous infection, contaminated food and water, and environmental threats. If we forget the crucial role this establishment plays in maintaining the Commonwealth’s safety and security, and if we continue to limit the funding and resources at its disposal, we will soon face a statewide public health emergency well beyond our comprehension.

■ Letter to the Legislator

Dear Senator Clark:

My name is Matthew Eames and I am a resident of Reading, Massachusetts and a student studying Health and Health Policy at Brandeis University. As a member of the Joint Committee of Public Health, you work very hard to understand the fundamental importance of prevention for the entire Commonwealth. Prevention is a primary function of the HSLI, an unsung hero that impacts every citizen of Massachusetts. As a Brandeis student, this issue is very close to my heart; when there was a positive case of tuberculosis on campus last fall, the Hinton State Lab was Massachusetts’ only source for all of the necessary prevention and testing procedures.

The Hinton State Laboratory Institute is the only establishment in the Commonwealth that serves as an early warning system for the spread of deadly infectious diseases, environmental biohazards and chemical agents. For example, HSLI was responsible this summer for testing for all of the Eastern Equine Encephalitis (EEE) cases when there was a scare of epidemic in the Commonwealth. When the State Lab Institute is doing its job, people are unaware of its existence simply because they have such a fantastic record of preventing communicable diseases and maintaining environmental hazards. HSLI is like a parent who works very hard to make life obstacle-free for their children; although their work goes largely unnoticed they are always there when help is needed.

Unfortunately, significant funding cuts have hindered the State Lab Institute’s ability to effectively protect the citizens of Massachusetts from these real threats. The current funding is just not enough to support the infrastructure, personnel, and operations of a modern research facility. When fighting disease on a population level, we cannot cut corners by reducing the budget for our only source of protection against a potential epidemic. In order to maintain consistent safety in Massachusetts, we must address the Hinton State Lab Institute’s needs. I did not realize the seriousness of the budget cuts until I saw the buildings firsthand. The labs were nothing like the modern laboratories I’m used to at Brandeis; they were run down and definitely not state of the art. Employees were telling me about how the power goes out and how the elevators no longer function properly. The State Lab Institute even has to use a large portion of this budget to simply pay their rent, which is unheard of in other states for a research facility of this caliber.

Opponents to the increased funding may argue that a public lab for diseases like TB is unnecessary because doctors could just be trained in hospitals or clinics. However, if the physicians did everything that’s...
recommended by the preventive health task force, it is estimated that the appointment would last 7 hours. They could also argue that increased funding for a public health lab is unnecessary because private services could handle the same tasks with equal productivity. Prevention efforts at the public level save the state and its residents millions of dollars each year because it means that people do not have to pay thousands of dollars out of pocket to test for a disease such as rabies (costs $6,000 per individual).

The solution is simple. I am asking you to prioritize line item #4516-1000, which calls for a request of an additional $2.6 million, when you meet with the House Ways and Means Committee. The additional budget would be used on specialized laboratory equipment, critical infrastructure improvements, training and education for public health expert clinicians, and contracted community health workers for high-risk, ethnically diverse populations. Thank you for your time and for listening to my concerns for our great state!

House Ways and Means Script
Hello Rep. Dempsey. My name is Jonathan Steinberg and I am resident of Waltham. Every day the citizens of the Commonwealth make their morning coffee with clean water, scramble fresh eggs for breakfast, enjoy the clean air of New England, and go to work or school without having to worry about becoming sick. We live very safe and healthy lives here and it is due in large part to the work of an unsung hero, an institution that works behind the scenes to protect us from dangerous, yet very real threats. Representative, I am talking about the Hinton State Laboratory Institute. It works 24 hours a day, 365 days a year to ensure that residents of Massachusetts can focus on their families and their contributions to the world. We may not recognize it, but it’s because of the people at the State Lab doing their jobs that we can do ours.

Among other important functions, the Hinton State Lab serves as the only emergency preparedness response system in the state regarding the early detection of infectious disease outbreaks. During the recent bird flu outbreak, the State Lab worked around the clock to monitor areas with growing numbers of cases, as well as other high-risk flu “hot spots.” It also provided accelerated turnaround for testing of samples from potential cases, coordinated vaccine dissemination throughout the state, and distributed its staff of trained health workers to communities, hospitals and clinics. This is routine activity for the State Lab.

We need to continue investing in prevention Rep. Dempsey. For the Hinton State Lab to continue being able to perform at such a high level, the state must put preventative health efforts at the forefront of health care. And if the legislators fail to appreciate the importance of prevention, it is going to cost the state, both financially and in lost lives. Tuberculosis for example is still prevalent. Over 300,000 people still suffer from TB in Massachusetts and that number of new cases increased by 10% in 2012. Aside from the deaths that would result from downplaying prevention, each untreated case of simple TB costs the state $840,000, while drug resistant cases can cost as much as $2.1 million.

The need for prevention is clear, but the legislature has not acted accordingly. Since FY2007, the Hinton State Laboratory line item has seen its funding cut by over 20%. Over the same time span, the State Lab has had to release 18% of its staff, and has had to move resources away from many important infectious disease research labs. While the House did maintain level funding from FY2013 at $12.3 million, this allocation is insufficient for the State Lab to adequately serve and protect the people of Massachusetts. Furthermore, in addition to its role in keeping the public safe, it also needs to pay its own rent and utilities, and needs to make long overdue renovations to an aging facility.

It is for this reason that we strongly recommend the House Ways and Means Committee allocate an additional $2.6 million to line item 4516-1000 for the State Laboratory and Communicable Disease Control Services. The additional funding would be used for a number of crucial services that both increase the State Lab Institute’s ability to serve the Commonwealth, and maintain a state of the art and efficient infrastructure that fosters rapidity and accuracy in research and testing.

I can provide you with a detailed breakdown of what the $2.6 million would be used for, but I wanted to highlight three specific uses here. First, a large portion of the money would be used to purchase specialized lab equipment and hire trained staff to aid in the quickness of foodborne illness detection, as well as in the surveillance of recent infectious disease threats such as West Nile Virus and Eastern Equine Encephalitis. Second, it would be used to cover the training and education of quality assurance teams consisting of public health experts in order to help primary care physicians and other clinicians incorporate preventative measures into new models of care, such as medical homes and ACOs. Finally, the additional money would go towards contracting with specialized community health workers with certain cultural and linguistic capacities to perform outreach to often ethnically diverse and under-immunized communities that are at high-risk for infectious diseases like TB and HIV.
Recent funding cuts have challenged the State Lab Institute's ability to function effectively and efficiently. While it has succeeded in remaining afloat in its surveillance and testing capacities thus far, an additional year of insufficient funding may be the catalyst that results in the State Lab Institute's outright failure. In the past, you have fought to reinvigorate the Massachusetts economy by fostering competition, investing in new technologies, and creating new jobs. You understand the importance of having a flourishing and efficient economy, but I must respectfully point out that without a healthy and able workforce, the state economy cannot grow. Approving the budget increase would guarantee the safety and security of the citizens of Massachusetts, and specifically that of the workers that contribute to making this state one of the prime economic centers in the country.

Rep. Dempsey, while the Hinton State Lab is small when it comes to the budget and physical size, the public health services it provides make it way too big to fail. The House Ways and Means Committee must allocate additional funds to keep it afloat and functional. The State Lab is the only institution that protects the residents of Massachusetts to such a high degree and though we may not be aware of the services it provides us, without them our safety and security would be in jeopardy.

Op-Ed

The Hinton State Laboratory Institute: The Hidden Gem of Public Health

Working in the shadows. Spending long nights on the job. Saving millions of people each year. The identity of your work is widely unknown. This sounds like the career resume of a superhero like Batman. However, those qualifications fit another position: the community health workers at the Hinton State Laboratory Institute (HSLI) in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts. Their research and community outreach protect the entire Commonwealth from infectious disease, environmental biohazards, and bioterrorism threats. Unfortunately, with a decrease in funding by 16% and 18% reduction in staff since FY2009, HSLI is in serious trouble. They can’t afford their rent, the elevators are broken, and the power unexpectedly shuts down: the time for action is now. We must stand as a united Commonwealth to help save the Hinton State Lab Institute. Dr. Alfred DeMaria, medical director of the bureau of infectious disease at HSLI illustrated their importance briefly when he stated “You don’t create a fire department when the fire starts, you have to have a fire department in place to respond to the fire.”

If anyone needs convincing of why the lab needs an increase in funding, I recommend that they take a tour of the laboratory. For being the only public health lab that is responsible for all the clean air, fresh water, and safe food in the entire state, it seemed nearly impossible to me how this laboratory could function under such conditions. Massachusetts is at the forefront of biotechnology, yet this lab that protects very fundamental aspects of everyone’s daily health is decrepit.

Essentially, with the current funding level for the State Lab budget, it will soon be impossible to support the infrastructure, maintain personnel, and even stay in their current location. Over the last few years, HSLI has had to cut corners with the budget by ignoring the upkeep of the building itself; instead focusing on keeping their nurses and staff and maintaining their programs. The biggest problem with HSLI is that they operate under the landowners of UMASS medical school, and HSLI is worried that UMASS will leave HSLI essentially homeless. If HSLI cannot keep up with their operation due to the dwindling budget, then UMASS has no stake in their building and they are expected to leave to a nicer location in Mattapan. When this happens, HSLI will be in serious trouble operating under the Department of Public Health's control.

Because the Hinton State Lab has been losing ground for a number of years, the fact that they still manage to survive is miraculous. It is a tribute to the commitments of the staff members who take less money and work extra hours in comparison to their peers at private laboratories. Their employees are truly amazing because having a facility that does not work as efficiently and effectively as possible leads to suffering in terms of employee morale and productivity, yet they do an amazing job at keeping Massachusetts residents safe. It’s also a tribute to their supporters in the community who have gone to extreme measures to back HSLI and help them keep some of their resources and try to increase their budget.

The Hinton State Lab relies on its local supporters for community outreach and to spread the word on its role in Massachusetts’ public health efforts. As community members, we must work hard to inform our legislators on the importance of HSLI on all levels. From the prevention of deadly infectious diseases like tuberculosis to rabies testing, which saves individuals thousands of dollars annually, the Hinton State Laboratory Institute is a hidden gem that deserves the appreciation and support of the entire Commonwealth.

Tell your local legislator to champion line item #4516-1000, the increase of the HSLI budget by $2.25 million.
Excerpts from Campaign Journals

Jonathan

This meeting [with Representative Denise Garlick] was probably the most educational for me. It was the first substantial meeting I had with a legislator. We went with the class to the Statehouse the day before to meet with Rep. Kaufman and get acquainted with the establishment. The next day Matt and I went back to the Statehouse with Cynthia [professional advocate lobbying for HSLI] to begin advocating for our line item (4516-1000 – State Laboratory and Communicable Disease Control).

The goal of the meeting was to convince Rep. Garlick to make that line item one of her priorities to the House Ways and Means Committee. Cynthia informed us that once the governor released his budget proposal, each representative is allowed a short time to meet with the House Ways and Means Committee chairman [Rep. Dempsey]. In the meeting they may prioritize three line items and plead their case for increased or level funding. I realized that advocates like us play a crucial role in this process. We needed to be diligent in setting up meetings after meeting with legislators to try and gain support for our cause. We needed to be patient when legislators said they could not fully commit to prioritizing our line item at that time, but we also needed to be persistent in following up and continuing to educate them.

In the meeting, I got my first taste of what the legislative perception of the Hinton State Lab was. While Rep. Garlick was definitely a supporter, she admitted that the first thing that legislators think of when they hear about HSLI is the drug lab scandal from 2010. While we know that the situation was blown out of proportion and wrongly shamed HSLI’s name, legislators don’t have the time to educate themselves on everything so they often become “slaves” to the media. Cynthia though did a great job informing Rep. Garlick about the truth behind the drug scandal, and how the integral functions that HSLI performs are unrelated to the drug lab.

I was also very [pleasantly] surprised that Rep. Garlick engaged Matt and I. I thought coming into the meeting that Cynthia would be doing the talking and Matt and I would be observing, but it was clear to me from then on that both Cynthia and the legislators expected us to be participating advocates as well. Rep. Garlick asked us what we brought to the table and how we could be integral members of the advocacy team. She suggested that we personalize the issue, and use anecdotes such as the TB case at Brandeis or a comparison of the Brandeis and HSLI labs.

Matthew

This 15-minute meeting was unlike any other meeting with a legislator because it meant so much more; I am a constituent of Senator Clark’s district and I could witness firsthand how much legislators care for people living in their district. I was able to express my concerns and opinions to Senator Clark’s aide, and her aide was learning so much about TB and Hinton State Lab Institute. Then, when I was finally able to talk to Senator Clark, she reacted to my presence by shouting “I LOVE the Hinton State Lab Institute!” which sparked a great conversation about its importance, its struggle in the legislature, and how to keep fighting. She really appreciated our efforts and our determination to fight for a cause that we really cared about. Senator Clark is on the board of public health so she was well-informed on the issue and a huge supporter of the line item, and she told us that while HSLI is struggling with budget cuts, we have to keep making these visits and spread the word to other legislators. This meeting really inspired me to put in extra for the rest of the semester: make that extra phone call, deliver that extra message, and volunteer that extra hour. I realized that if I put in more effort personally, I can leave a personal, and lasting, impression on the future of HSLI.

Update

As of May 30, 2013, line-item 4516-1000 received a recommended FY2014 appropriation of $12.3 million by the Massachusetts State Senate – effectively the same funding as FY2013.

For more information

The Medical Advisory Committee for the Elimination of Tuberculosis

http://www.mamacet.org