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Biobank created from baby blood samples

Kim Kozlowski / The Detroit News

Detroit -- A decision 25 years ago to save blood collected from newborns in Michigan has the state poised to become a leader in disease research, officials said Monday, as they unveiled plans for a new nonprofit population-based biobank in Tech Town.

"It opens the door for advanced medical research that has the potential to produce very real medical breakthroughs," said Janet Olszewski, director of the Michigan Department of Community Health.

The Michigan Neonatal Biobank will be developed from blood that has been collected from 4 million newborns over the past 25 years. States differ in how long they keep newborn blood spots, but Michigan's collection is believed to be among the oldest in the nation. The blood is routinely screened for 49 rare diseases.

The blood spots will be stripped of any information that could identify their owners, then cataloged and stored at a new temperature-controlled facility in Tech Town, Wayne State University's high-tech incubator. So far only a fraction of the samples have gone through that process. Most of the samples are currently being stored in Lansing.

The state plans to promote the repository to scientists studying genetics of childhood and adult-onset diseases by using the blood spots, which contain DNA. The data could also be used to study the impact of exposure to toxic chemicals before birth.

"This is Michigan's future," said Randal Charlton, Tech Town executive director. "You've got a new industry ... which scientists and experts believe could be a center of excellence in Michigan in biobanking."

The biobank is part of the Michigan BioTrust for Health, a collaboration between the state Health Department and Wayne State University, University of Michigan, Michigan State University and the Van Andel Institute in Grand Rapids.

It emerged after several years of research, including several community focus groups and polls, which indicated widespread support.

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