

Antibody Research Helped By Grant Program

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By Amy Amour

Millions of free dollars are available to high-tech firms across the nation to help with research and development, but many companies aren't even aware it's out there.

It's a truly untapped market. There's a tremendous amount of grant money for biotechnology firms. They just need to apply to get it, said Wayne Harvey, interim director of the state program for MO FAST program.

Harvey helps small businesses apply for grants through two grant program: Small Business Innovative Research and Small Business Technology Transfer. Each year, 11 federal agencies, including the Department of Transportation, the National Science Foundation and the National Institute of Health, set aside monies to fund research and development grants. Harvey can help steer the company in the right direction in choosing which agency to apply for grant money. He can also help with grant writing and guide the small business through the process.

I can walk people through what the agency is looking for, the mission of the agency and how to structure the proposal, said Harvey.

Both programs are geared to help small businesses with research and development that might not be possible without the help of grant money. In the first phase, companies apply for a grant up to \$100,000 to spend a year studying the feasibility of a product. If the study is successful, the company can then apply for up to \$750,000 for two more years of research.

Last year, \$2 billion in grants were available nationwide. In 2003, Missouri high-tech businesses received about \$8 million in grants, and in 2004, Missouri companies received about \$11 million in SBIR and STTR grants. It's literally free money. . . . If the [study] doesn't work, you don't have to pay it back. The business keeps all of its intellectual property, . . . and all business patents belong to the small business, said Harvey. A new, local bio-technology company has utilized the help of Harvey to apply for a grant from the National Institute of Health. Antibody Research Corp. opened its lab doors at the Economic Development Center of St. Charles County in July, and owner and scientist Das Prayaga is in the early stages of applying for a grant to help his business.

Founded by its sole employee, Prayaga, the biotechnology company is focused on making antibodies for diagnostic kits and for clinical purposes. Antibodies are used in diagnostic kits like pregnancy tests as well as testing for different kinds of cancers and infectious diseases.

Antibodies are one of the key ingredients which help to detect the key molecules in many of these diseases, said Prayaga. We are in the business of making antibodies for diagnostic kits or for the purpose of research. We primarily focus on biotechnology businesses and diagnostics companies.

But the company will also work with other types of companies that need antibodies in their research or universities.

As a scientist, marketing has been the most challenging aspect of starting up his own business.

For me as a scientist, the No. 1 challenge is to do the marketing and getting the contracts, said Prayaga. For me what is new, is doing the marketing and bringing in the contracts. There is no company if there is no contract.

But Prayaga already has several contracts. The first three clients for the scientist are Washington University, Yale University and Harvard University. The company will complete its first contract with Washington University in the next couple of weeks, and Prayaga is ready to start his contracts with both Yale and Harvard to produce antibodies for clinical research for the universities.

Prayaga has his Ph.D. in immunology from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. After graduating from LSU in 1993, Prayaga worked for several biotechnology companies, including Agracetus in Madison, Wis.; Hoffmann-La Roche in Nutley, N.J.; and CuraGen in New Haven, Conn.

Prayaga traveled to St. Louis for a position as a senior scientist at Monsanto in St. Louis. At Monsanto, where Prayaga worked for three and a half years, Prayaga worked on drug discovery research in the areas of cardiovascular diseases, arthritis and inflammation. Prayaga also worked for St. Louis-based biotechnology firm Leinco. After being laid off from his job as a scientist, Prayaga decided to take a chance and start on his own company.

At that time I was thinking, 'OK, maybe I need to get into doing my own something.' I always had this interest in doing a business, but something like this [layoff] forced me into doing that, said Prayaga.

So after researching options for a location of his fledgling company, Prayaga chose the EDC.

The EDC is close to my house, and I also checked with other places in St. Louis that provide incubation space for new companies. . . . I felt the EDC was very attractive in terms of providing support as well as the rent was very affordable, . . . and the people there are really helpful, said Prayaga.

The long-term goal of the company is to develop into a diagnostic company. As a diagnostic company, once a kit, using antibodies, is made to test for a particular cancer or infectious disease, it can be marketed directly to patients or hospitals.

There are a lot of unmet needs in the market for various diseases, said Prayaga. I was always interested in science, especially when I could come up with some new ideas and products that might help us in some ways.

To learn more about the grants available, contact Harvey at 314- 631-5509.

Source: St. Charles County Business Record.

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