

VIP game plan in full swing targets 2023 opening

Having leaped the drawing board, the game plan for the Virology and Vaccine Science and Technology Institute of the Philippines or VIP is now in full swing. DOST Undersecretary for R&D Dr. Rowena Cristina L. Guevara declared in a DOST Kapihan interview held on May 25, 2021, the target opening of the VIP would be from 2023 to 2024.

On the tails of VIP

A year ago, exactly 71 days after the WHO declaration on March 11, 2020 of the coronavirus disease or COVID-19 as an outbreak of pandemic proportions, DOST-ITDI, in a proposed bill on May 20, hoped to establish a Virology Science and Technology Institute of the Philippines as it was called then. When established, ITDI will conduct virology research for human, animal, and plant applications.

Sponsored by Senators Panfilo "Ping" M. Lacson Sr. and Christopher Lawrence "Bong" T. Go, Undersecretary Guevara reported that many more members of the House of Representatives support the bill. She added that it had passed a legislative committee hearing by the Committee on Appropriations chaired by Rep. Eric Go Yap of the ACT-CIS (Anti-Crime and Terrorism Community Involvement and Support) Partylist.

However, the VIP bill has to be enacted into law first.

Meanwhile, with the bill still pending, ITDI has already started research studies and capacity-building projects. When passed, construction is targeted to be completed by the end of 2023 to 2024.

"Our DOST Secretary has discussed with the Bases and Conversion Development Authority finalization of the term sheet and lease contract. DBM has allotted a budget to DPWH for the detailed engineering design of VIP," Undersecretary Guevara explained.

She added that VIP would not be duplicating the functions of the Philippine Council for Health Research and Development (DOST-PCHRD) contrary to public doubts.

Elaborating that, "VIP will be a stand-alone research laboratory for virology and vaccine development in the country, which will house the most advanced facilities and equipment, and incorporating the newest technology, ideas, and features. PCHR, on the other hand, is a sectoral council tasked to formulate national policies, programs, and strategies for health and research development. It will only be part of the governing body of VIP. "

COVID-19: Coming full circle

During VISION 2021: VIP Information, Opportunities, and Networking, a webinar recently organized by the National Research Council of the Philippines (DOST-NRCP), Guevara voiced out that with VIP, DOST hopes to create proudly '*Gawang Pinoy, Gawa sa Pilipinas*' virology technologies, indeed an evident and expressive way to come full circle after a frightening start on March 11, 2020.

To this, DOST-ITDI, through its Environment and Biotechnology Division (EBD-ITDI), is fleshing out and adding a deeper appreciation of the increasing importance of virology and VIP.

Through eight projects on basic viral research and the development of diagnostic tools, therapeutics, and vaccines, EBD points out that "We need to know more and more about viruses. We need to understand their links to certain diseases better because there might be viruses where we did not see them before."

The end goal is for the Philippines to become vaccine self-sufficient through local production and capacity building,

With an initial endowment of Php284 million, EBD has since started work on:

- Project 1: Viruses on animals that can be transferred to humans (zoonotic viruses) to prevent future epidemics or pandemics;
- Projects 2 and 3: Food and water-borne pathogen detection and their treatment;
- Project 4: Zika virus-related diagnostics;
- Project 5: Rapid detection kit for African Swine Fever virus;
- Project 6: Tomato yellow leaf curl virus research which infects tomatoes, peppers, beans, and weeds;

Inspired by Technology, Driven by Innovation

- Project 7: Local COVID-19 vaccine research, development, and production; and
- Project 8: Production of a COVID-19 antibody test (enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay [ELISA]-based) kit or serological ELISA to augment tests that check for presence of antibodies to SARS-CoV-2 in blood samples.

EBD will be working with various institutions, including the University of Santo Tomas, the University of the Philippines, St. Luke's Medical Center, and the Research Institute for Tropical Medicine. Aside from these institutions, EBD will be working with Balik-Scientists working on virology and vaccine development.

With 669 Balik Scientist engagements since its program inception, mostly coming from North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia, VIP is expectant of a more significant number of engagements -- a foreboding that it is indeed well on its way to fruition sooner than expected. (AMGuevarra\DOST-ITDI S&T MEDIA SERVICE)

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