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## A Closer Look at a Federally Designated Tech Hub

By Dava Stewart / December 15, 2023

*The Birmingham Biotechnology Hub is focused on applying AI to drug development as one of 31 Regional Innovation and Technology Hubs designated by the White House*

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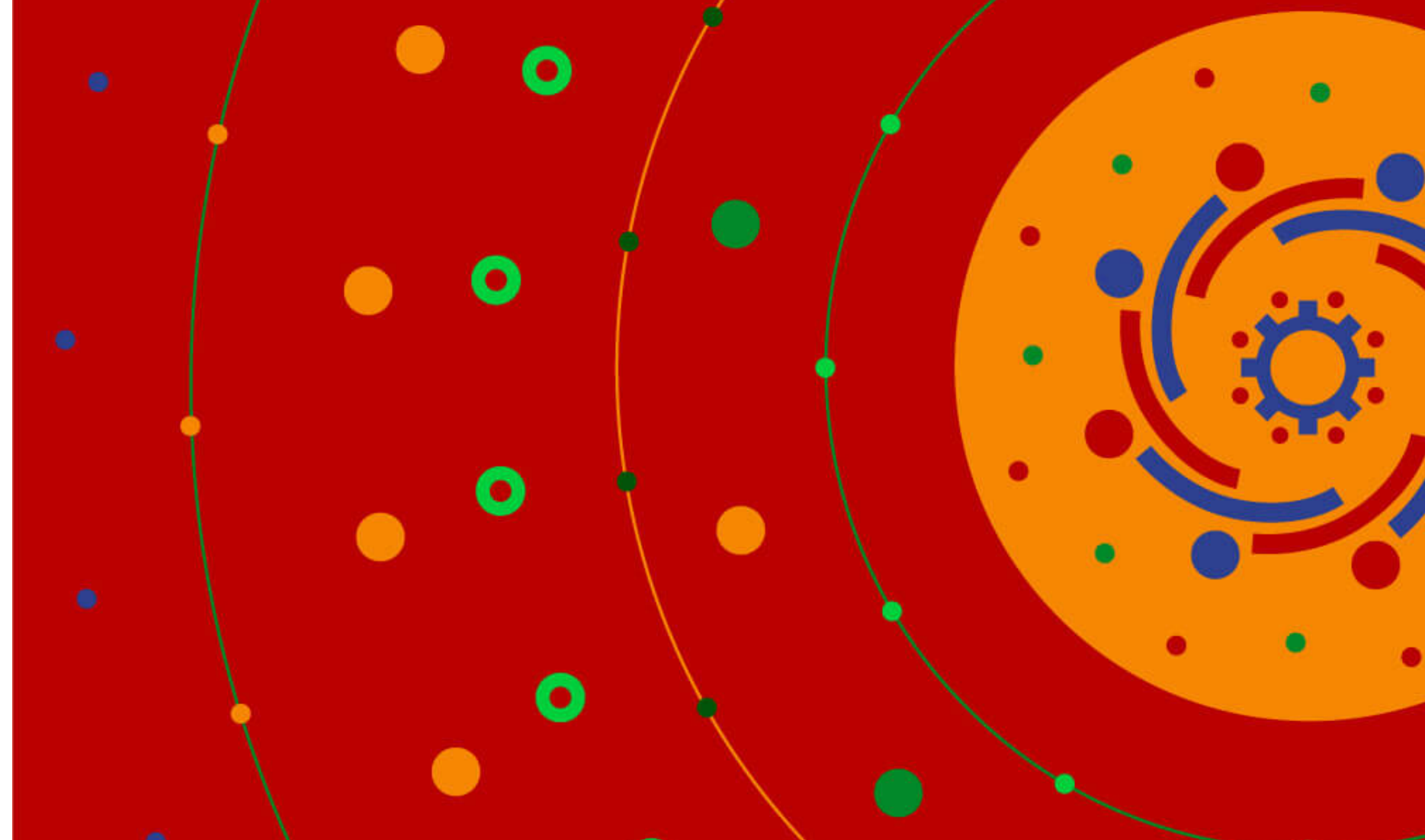
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This October, the White House [announced](#) 31 communities around the country as Regional Innovation and Technology Hubs, called "Tech Hubs." Each of the Tech Hubs designated will focus on developing innovative technologies such as semiconductors, clean energy, biotechnology, quantum computing, artificial intelligence (AI) and others. The 31 were chosen from nearly 200 applications and are now eligible to compete for \$40 million to \$75 million each in grants.

The program, authorized under the CHIPS and Science Act of 2022, is designed to spur economic growth, drive innovation and improve national security. The Birmingham Biotechnology Hub, led by Southern Research, is one of the designated Hubs. [Lexie Lehmann, Associate Director of Economic Development at Southern Research](#), discussed with TechChannel what being a Tech Hub means for the organization and the regional community.

### Intersections of Study and Interest

In the first phase of the competition, Southern Research had to select a key technology focus area from a list provided by the National Science Foundation. They chose to lead with two focus areas: biotechnology and AI. "Given all the interesting work our region is doing at the intersection of those two domains, particularly in the areas of bioinformatics and computer-aided drug design," says Lehmann, "we decided to leverage the [critical work going on at UAB](#) [University of Alabama at Birmingham] to improve the participation and inclusion of underrepresented and underserved communities in Alabama and nationwide."

The group of partners working with Southern Research as part of the Tech Hubs competition is impressively diverse, by design. "As much as possible, we worked to build a broad coalition that was reflective of the unique strengths of our region," Lehmann says. The initial application for the program included a list of the kinds of groups that had to be included—such as a workforce group, an institution of higher learning and a group representing commercial industry—but allowed for some optional groups, as well, which the Birmingham team included to showcase the breadth of their coalition.

Alabama is home to more Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) than any other state, a fact that Lehmann considers a unique regional strength—and including HBCUs was critical. Several groups focused on increasing minority representation in technology careers are also part of the coalition.

The aspect of diversity among members of the coalition is especially important in light of the work happening in the region in bioinformatics and computer-aided drug design. The Birmingham Tech Hub is working to improve inclusion of underrepresented and underserved communities in drug discovery and ultimately drug development. The intersection of biotechnology and AI provides exciting opportunities to include groups that have historically been underrepresented in clinical studies and in the field of biomedical research as a whole.

"We were really excited to see how quickly people got on board to support something that didn't really have any initial funding attached to it," notes Lehmann. "We focused on elevating our region to the national stage and positioning Birmingham for future biotech investment."

### Place-Based Economic Development

Conventional wisdom says that most innovation happens in Silicon Valley or New York, but that isn't always the case. By designating Tech Hubs in communities all over the country, the federal government is committed to investing in places that aren't historically associated with technological innovation.

"The Administration is acknowledging that innovation and technology development can come from anywhere in the country, not just coastal cities and regions traditionally associated with innovation," says Lehmann.

The list of designated Tech Hubs includes groups in 23 states and Puerto Rico; some are located in areas with tribal governments, smaller populations or places where coal mining has largely been an economic driver. "The designations reflect the diversity of our country. Many of our Hubs include small cities, rural areas, historically underserved communities," says Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo, according to [a report from NBC News](#).

### Risk Mitigation and Cybersecurity

The Economic Development Administration has made it clear that applications for the next phase of the competition will need to include risk mitigation and cybersecurity protections.

"Just as the program stresses that communities all over the country offer innovative ideas and are doing crucial work on a variety of technologies, it also recognizes that all communities and regions have a role to play in national security," says Lehmann. "The whole country has to work together, and regional economies must collaborate to promote the nation on the global stage and to mitigate risk and improve security."

### The Future of Tech Hubs

Although members of the Birmingham Biotechnology Hub are enthusiastic about the opportunity to compete and potentially win the grant money available through the Tech Hubs program, Lehmann says that it is neither the beginning nor the end of the organization's work.

"The competition has certainly laid the groundwork for how we will work together as an ecosystem," she says. The region has been part of other competitions and challenges, such as the National Science Foundation's Regional Innovation Engines opportunity, where they were semi-finalists, and Lehmann says the Tech Hubs challenge fits in with the work they've been doing.

The current program has given the coalition a timeline and a deadline, which has accelerated the development of the Birmingham ecosystem. Lehmann adds, "The investments that we're making and the broader strategy our ecosystem is leading has been ongoing and will continue after the competition."

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**About the author** Dava Stewart is a writer interested in the intersection of healthcare and technology based in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

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