

Deadly mold delays opening of Senate's day-care center

WASHINGTON - Inside the building that was supposed to be filled by now with the sounds of young children, a potentially deadly mold is eating through the walls. After a year of tests and much hand-wringing, parents hope the building can be salvaged as the new day-care center for children of Senate employees.

The stachybotrys mold, discovered during an inspection in March 1998, is especially dangerous to infants - devastating news for the nonprofit center's board of directors, because the new facility is to add infants to its young population.

Since the discovery, everything has moved in slow motion. The Capitol architect's office has spent a year testing the mold and trying to figure out what to do. The nervous parents have hired an environmental consultant with their own money. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health has been asked for advice.

The black mold, still growing in the unfinished building a few blocks from the Capitol, is another embarrassment for the Architect of the Capitol - the office that maintains congressional grounds and buildings.

The office has struggled for a year to comply with workplace safety rules and stumbled in attempts to revive a moribund waste recycling program.

Herb Franklin, spokesman for the architect's office, has moved cautiously concerning the day-care center but says it is now ready with a plan to eradicate the mold - a suspect in the deaths of at least 12 infants in Cleveland in the last six years and 140 illnesses nationally.

Parents, whose children are currently in a smaller building on Capitol Hill, remain skeptical.

"We've had concerns over the length of time it has taken to get things moving," said Lisa Tuite, who is president of the day-care center's board of directors, made up of parents. "How long does it take to come up with a . . . plan? We wish we were higher on the priority list."

The new center, being constructed with taxpayers' money under a \$1.9 million contract, is slated to care for 68 children, compared with 47 now. The center is mainly for children of Senate employees, who pay tuition to operate the day-care program; no senators have children there. The House has a separate child-care facility.

It's not clear why the mold, which typically grows on water-soaked ceilings and walls, appeared in the building. Ms. Tuite, a Senate employee, blames the architect's office and the contractor.

"The contractor didn't do well enough to keep water out of the building, and the architect's office was not monitoring the problem while it got as big as it did," she said.

Parents were tipped off about the mold through an unofficial phone call to a board member from someone in the architect's office.

Mr. Franklin said officials decided to notify the parents quickly when the mold was discovered. If there was a delay, he said, "we're

talking about a half a day or a day."

"We had several meetings with the parents' board," he said. "We decided they would become our partners to make sure a . . . plan was acceptable to them and to us. We want to make sure that no one has the slightest hesitancy to occupy the building," which is now due to open in September, a year behind schedule.

Mr. Franklin said the parents' consultant and other safety experts have agreed that the architect's plans for ridding the building of the mold appear to be sound.

But Dr. Dorr G. Dearborn of Cleveland, a professor of pediatrics at Case Western Reserve Medical School who has researched stachybotrys, said the mold is "going to be very difficult to totally eradicate."

"Taking things down to a practically safe level is a reasonable possibility, but it's difficult to know what that level is," he said. "We don't know what level of exposure causes the disease."

Angel Campbell, a Senate employee and the board member dealing with the problem, said, "Having our own consultant is our way of assuring parents of children they don't have anything to worry about in terms of health and safety risk."

PHOTO(S): (Associated Press) The stachybotrys mold, which has postponed the opening of this Washington day-care center for Senate employees, is suspected in the deaths of at least 12 infants in Cleveland in the last six years and 140 illnesses across the country.

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