

A year later, deadly mold still in future Senate day care center

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WASHINGTON (AP) _ Constructing a new day care center for children of Senate employees, officials discovered a potentially deadly mold eating through the walls. A year later, the children still haven't moved in, frustrated parents have hired their own safety consultant and the Capitol architect is just now deciding how to solve the problem.

The *stachybotrys* mold, discovered during construction in March 1998, is especially dangerous to infants, and adding infant care is one of the changes planned for the new and expanded Senate day care center.

The slimy black mold, still growing in the unfinished building, is another headache for the embattled architect's office, which maintains congressional grounds and buildings. In the past year, the office also has endured criticism as it struggled to bring the Capitol in compliance with workplace safety rules imposed elsewhere in America and floundered in attempts to revive a moribund waste recycling program.

A spokesman acknowledges the architect's office has moved cautiously in the day care matter, but says it is now ready with a plan to eradicate the *stachybotrys* mold - a suspect in the deaths of at least 12 infants in Cleveland in the past six years and 140 illnesses nationally.

Parents 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 remediation plan? We wish we were higher on the priority list."

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

Herb Franklin, spokesman for the architect's office, said that officials there decided when the mold was discovered to quickly notify the parents. 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 remediation 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.

Meanwhile, the Senate employees' children remain in their existing center in another building. No senators' children are currently in the program.

Franklin said the parents' consultant and the U.S. occupational safety agency, which has been consulted, have agreed 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 currently 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."

The former board member who got the tip about the mold said the architect's office initially told her the problem might be solved with a simple cleaning with bleach, but officials settled on a more thorough approach when parents demanded assurances the mold would be removed in its entirety.

The plan now includes replacing wallboard and duct work and testing for water leaks.

A primary contractor on the building, Alberto Gomez of Prince Construction Co., said he still believes the stachybotrys could just be ``washed out with Clorox. It doesn't take rocket science to get rid of it."

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