

Kelly LoBianco - Director, LA County Department of Economic Opportunity



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Kelly LoBianco, founding director of the Los Angeles County Department of Economic Opportunity, discusses how the agency is driving growth of the region's life sciences sector. She outlines LA County's Life Sciences Industry Cluster Strategy and Action Plan, which aims to create 10,000 new industry jobs by 2030 and explains how the County is working with state and regional partners to expand infrastructure, streamline business processes, and strengthen workforce inclusivity. LoBianco also highlights what makes Los Angeles a rising hub for innovation and opportunity in life sciences and welcomes companies to invest in the region.

As the founding director of the Los Angeles County Department of Economic Opportunity, please introduce yourself and explain your role in helping establish the organisation.

I am the Director of the LA County Department of Economic Opportunity (LADEO), a County agency launched in July 2022. I joined several months before its establishment to help design and consolidate the County's workforce and economic development functions under one roof.

The County had long been exploring how to better serve workers and businesses, commissioning studies and recommendations to centralise workforce systems and strengthen economic

development. When the pandemic hit, our Board of Supervisors recognised the urgent need for a coordinated, well-resourced response to massive job and business losses. That became the catalyst for creating a new department dedicated to driving inclusive and sustainable economic growth across a county of 10 million residents.

My background is in economic development in Washington, DC, and New York, including at the NYC Department of Small Business Services, which went through a similar transformation during the Bloomberg years. At LA County, our department focuses on expanding economic opportunity and mobility for all through three main pillars: workforce, business, and community development.

We oversee the public workforce system through the LA County Workforce Development Board and the America's Job Centres of California, which provide no-cost job training and connect residents to high-quality jobs in growth sectors like life sciences. We also operate the Office of Small Business, which offers one-on-one support to entrepreneurs and manages certification and contracting for diverse local businesses. Additionally, we lead community development efforts by including commercial corridor revitalisation, property redevelopment, and placemaking to ensure public and private projects maximise community benefit.

Life sciences is one of our key focus industries because it offers both strong job opportunities and broader health and economic benefits for the region. LA County has long recognised its importance, and our department is building on that foundation to help strengthen the sector's competitiveness nationally and globally.

How would you describe the current strengths of Los Angeles County's life sciences community?

LA County's greatest strength is its scale and diversity in both people and talent. We are home to one of the largest and most diverse populations and workforces in the world that speaks more than 200 languages. That diversity extends beyond culture to expertise and experience, creating a robust talent pool for the life sciences as well as a uniquely diverse patient population for clinical research.

We are also home to some of the world's leading healthcare and educational institutions, including major universities and research centres. LA County produces more than 8,700 life sciences graduates annually, which is 35% more than peer regions across the US. This deep academic pipeline fuels both innovation and workforce development.

The region also benefits from a strong manufacturing base rooted in our history as a leader in aerospace and advanced manufacturing, which provides critical infrastructure and transferable skills for biotech production. While many still associate LA with Hollywood, we are equally a hub for healthcare, aerospace, technology, and a growing life sciences capital.

We have a thriving startup ecosystem supported by major incubators at California State University (Cal State) LA and the Lundquist Institute, both now operating at full capacity. Over the past decade, LA County has received over USD 1.7 billion in NIH funding and ranks second in the nation for the number of life sciences patents produced.

Today, the county is home to more than 3,000 life sciences companies. This is more than any peer region by size, with firms like Amgen, Kite, Takeda, and Grifols leading the way. Combined with our proximity and collaboration with hubs like San Francisco and San Diego, and strong state-level support for innovation, LA County is uniquely positioned to advance economic mobility, health innovation, and environmental sustainability through life sciences.

Could you walk us through Los Angeles County's Life Sciences Industry Cluster Strategy and Action Plan, and outline its goal of creating 10,000 new industry jobs by 2030?

LA County has been investing in the life sciences for more than a decade. Over ten years ago, the county commissioned what became known as the Battelle Report, which outlined the sector's potential as a major economic driver for the region. That report led to a wave of foundational investments and partnerships, which have been ongoing in recent years.

We helped establish Bioscience LA, an independent nonprofit that now serves as the region's cluster organisation by bringing together stakeholders, identifying opportunities, and keeping focus on industry growth. The county also invested in physical infrastructure, such as the incubators at Cal State LA and The Lundquist Institute.

Another major area of focus has been talent development. We recognised early on that supporting our workforce would be key to building a strong, local life sciences pipeline. Through partnerships with regional workforce boards, we have launched initiatives such as BioFlex, an apprenticeship program with the South Bay Workforce Investment Board, and BioFutures, a paid internship program through Bioscience LA. We also established a bioscience investment fund in partnership with MarsBio to seed and grow local startups.

After the pandemic, with renewed leadership and focus from the LA County Board of Supervisors, we wanted to take stock of how far the industry had come and where we still had room to grow. For example, between 2012 and 2023, life sciences employment in the county grew by nine percent and added more than 3,200 jobs. This growth happened despite an overall private-sector employment decline of two percent. The number of incubators also grew from one to nine since 2014. While these accomplishments were clear indications of progress, we also recognised that Los Angeles still lags behind our peer regions in translating assets into large-scale commercial success and local, high-quality jobs.

To address that, we brought together an advisory board of 17 industry leaders, co-led by Biocom California and LA Economic Development Corporation (LAEDC), and engaged with hundreds of stakeholders from across the ecosystem. The result was the creation of the Life Sciences Industry Cluster Strategy and Action Plan, which has a goal to create 10,000 new life sciences jobs by 2030. That number reflects the opportunity gap of growth we could have achieved if we had kept pace with our peer countries. The plan aims to close that gap by doubling down on collaboration, innovation, and workforce readiness across the region.

The action plan is organised around four strategic pillars. How will these priority areas work together to achieve the county’s life sciences objectives?

The four strategic pillars were designed to address the biggest barriers we face in matching or exceeding the growth seen in peer regions like Boston or the Bay Area. Those regions have their own challenges, but LA is unique as we have immense geographic scale, a deeply diverse workforce, and tremendous institutional assets. However, we also face real hurdles in infrastructure, coordination, and space availability.

The first pillar focuses on expanding affordable lab, manufacturing, and office space. Many startups coming out of our incubators quickly run into physical space constraints. There simply are not enough wet labs, manufacturing facilities, or mid-scale “step-up” spaces for companies ready to grow. As a result, we often lose promising firms to other regions. Addressing that means identifying and transforming available sites across the County so that companies can scale up and commercialise here. We want to make LA an easy and attractive place to locate and expand.

The second pillar aims to improve the ease of doing business. We want to encourage life sciences firms to start, grow, and hire locally by improving the business environment and providing competitive incentives. LA County is made up of 88 cities and several unincorporated areas, which

means rules, zoning, and permitting processes can vary widely. That complexity can be a real challenge for incoming or expanding companies. We are working to streamline land use and permitting, align standards across jurisdictions, and provide clear front-facing support. For example, we now have a dedicated life sciences ombudsperson within the Department of Regional Planning to help businesses navigate the system. This is an important step toward a more coordinated and business-friendly environment.

The third pillar focuses on strengthening cluster connectivity and brand by fostering internal collaboration and external visibility. LA County's life sciences ecosystem is vast, but its scale can make it hard to communicate a cohesive identity. We want to tell a unified story about the competitive advantages of our institutions, workforce, and innovation assets, and help stakeholders see the full range of opportunities here. Bioscience LA plays a key role as a central hub, connecting industry partners and amplifying that shared narrative globally.

Finally, the fourth pillar centres on boosting the inclusivity of LA County's life sciences workforce by expanding career pathways and aligning training programs with employer needs. LA County has one of the most diverse workforces in the country, but representation in life sciences still does not fully reflect that diversity. Nearly 60% of life sciences jobs today do not require a bachelor's degree, which means there are real opportunities to expand access to good, family-sustaining careers. We're working with partners like Mission College, Cal State LA, and the broader public workforce system to strengthen pipelines into both technical and non-technical roles. These can be opportunities ranging from lab technicians to startup founders.

Together, these pillars form a comprehensive strategy to make LA County a true life sciences capital. Our ambition is to not only drive innovation and growth, but also inclusively and sustainably within the sector.

How is the Life Sciences Action Plan supported not only at the county level but also through collaboration with the state of California and other regional partners?

We are fortunate to be in a state that is deeply committed to industry transformation and economic mobility. One of the most significant catalysts for our Life Sciences Action Plan has been California Jobs First, an initiative launched by Governor Gavin Newsom to drive regional economic development across the state. This initiative brought together more than 800 organisations to shape a comprehensive economic development strategy that the Governor ultimately approved, and unlocked access to local, state, and federal funding streams. Through this effort, Governor

Newsom awarded USD 9 million in catalyst grants to LA County.

Another major investment from the Governor's office came in the form of USD 80 million worth of implementation grants state-wide to support industry transformation of key sectors outlined in each of the state's regions' economic strategy. Life sciences was one of LA County's core focus areas, and we successfully secured USD 24 million to help seed our Life Sciences Action Plan. Of that investment, USD 19 million will flow through the LA County DEO to help launch two new funds likely in 2026.

The first is the Tenant Improvement Fund, which will provide direct support for companies to upgrade or access physical space with a focus on graduation-stage companies. Second is the Graduation and Manufacturing Space Fund, which will finance multi-tenant space with a focus on graduation-stage companies. This is a competitive program for educational and healthcare institutions to create shared lab or manufacturing facilities for growing life science firms. The county anticipates contributing at least USD 6 million in additional funds for space and other components of our life sciences strategy, with potential to increase that amount as programs develop.

The LA County Economic Development Corporation (LAEDC) also received funds to support various business attraction efforts. The ambition is to bring two to four new life sciences companies to the region that will generate around 1,000 new jobs. The State also funded Bioscience LA to conduct a comprehensive asset mapping and marketing campaign, showcasing why LA is an ideal place for companies to launch and scale. Meanwhile, the Larta Institute's Heal.LA initiative is helping startups with technical assistance, acceleration, and access to capital. Finding capital is especially key as this is one of the biggest needs in the ecosystem.

All of these initiatives reflect the strong alignment between county, state, and regional partners, including LAEDC, the Larta Institute, Bioscience LA, Biocom California, and our Departments of Economic Opportunity and Regional Planning. Together, we are creating a coordinated, well-resourced framework that positions the county as a leader in life sciences innovation and inclusive growth.

How does the DEO support businesses looking to enter or expand within the Los Angeles region, and do you have a message you would like prospective companies to understand about the advantages of doing business in the county?

For companies looking to enter or expand within LA County, the DEO is a key point of contact and concierge. We regularly meet with domestic and international companies in life sciences and across other sectors to help them understand what doing business in LA County entails. We work closely with the county office of protocol and the World Trade Centre Los Angeles, which is part of the LAEDC, to co-host delegations and business visits. For example, we recently hosted a delegation from Singapore interested in the local innovation ecosystem.

Our team is still growing, and we have recently built out our business attraction and retention unit to provide more structured support. Through this unit, companies can access guidance on navigating LA County's complex regulatory landscape, identifying potential sites, and connecting with local partners and institutions in the life sciences and other high-growth sectors. We are also enhancing this concierge model as part of our California Jobs First Implementation Grant, in partnership with Bioscience LA, to ensure businesses have an easy, coordinated entry point into the region.

My message to prospective investors and companies is that LA County is open for business. We are a large and dynamic economy with 88 cities and over 100 unincorporated areas spanning from the Antelope Valley to the Pacific Coast. Like many regions, we face challenges ranging from climate impact to national policy shifts. Still, we remain resilient, innovative, and forward-looking in our ambitions.

LA is a county that continues to rebuild, reinvest, and reimagine. Our industries are thriving, our workforce is among the most diverse and skilled in the world, and our public institutions are committed to helping the life sciences sector succeed. For any company considering LA County, we welcome you to explore opportunities here and connect with us.

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