GIVE TO CENTER'S FIGHT VS. FEVER

Arizona has its own long-running epidemic: valley fever. The disease, found only in this arid corner of the country, can be debilitating and deadly.

Our state has more cases than everywhere else in the U.S. combined. And most of those are in Maricopa County.

But the hotspot for valley fever has had no place dedicated to treatment and research. Until now.

St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center and the University of Arizona College of Medicine are creating the Valley Fever Center in Phoenix. Based at the hospital, it's scheduled to open in January. The director will be John Galgiani, who founded UA's Valley Fever Center for Excellence.

This is a tremendous opportunity to reduce the toll of valley fever. An estimated 100,000 Arizonans a year get infected, often with few or flu-like symptoms. But thousands become sick enough to seek treatment. Several dozen die.

The disease, officially called coccidioidomycosis, is caused by breathing spores of a fungus that grows in desert soils. There's no cure and no vaccine. And with this year's repeated dust storms, the number of cases is on the rise.

And our pets get sick, too, with dogs particularly vulnerable.

The Phoenix center will offer improved diagnostic tools and coordinated case management. And it will provide access to the large pool of patients needed to test a promising drug, nikkomycin Z, that is being developed by Tucson-based Valley Fever Solutions (where Galgiani is chief medical officer).

What's needed now is a healthy dose of funding.

The federal government classifies valley fever as an "orphan disease" because it's so rare. Last year, that designation led the National Institutes of Health to put a welcome $3 million into developing nikkomycin Z.

But the "orphan" label also underlines how much we're on our own. Supporting the Phoenix center — and expanding its potential — is basically up to us.

Jim Meenaghan, a retired insurance executive who lives in Paradise Valley, went into action after his own bout with valley fever. He's organized a community group to raise resources for the center. This is a cause for local foundations and philanthropists to take up.

It should be a cause for the business community, too. The disease is an economic drag: Just the cost of hospitalizations in 2007 was $86 million. The productivity losses are enormous when the recovery can take months and may never be complete. Look at how former Diamondbacks player Conor Jackson lost a year of play when he had valley fever.

So far, the most generous donations to fight valley fever have come from out of state: The J.T. Tai & Co. Foundation of New York has given $1.8 million over the last six years.

That should inspire and challenge Arizonans.