

**NINA MOINI:** Starting at the beginning of this year, the US government effectively cut Cuba off from receiving oil shipments in an effort to force a regime change in that country. The blockade has led to frequent nationwide blackouts, and the lack of gasoline is now debilitating hospitals, the food supply, and public transportation.

Teddie Potter is a former nursing professor with the University of Minnesota. Now she spends her time leading a health nonprofit called Medical Education Cooperation with Cuba. She's been spending a lot of time in Cuba and is on the line to share what she's seeing and how her team is helping. Teddie, thanks so much for being with us this afternoon.

**TEDDIE** Thank you for inviting me, Nina.

**POTTER:**

**NINA MOINI:** Would you start by telling us what your focus is right now as an organization? I mentioned all of the ripple effects and the problems that are going on. Where is your organization focusing in?

**TEDDIE** Well, absolutely. MEDICC is a nonprofit that's been around for 30 years, and we believe that human suffering and  
**POTTER:** human health really know no boundaries. So right now, our most urgent concern is that human lives are being lost due to the harsh US sanctions, and most recently, the oil blockade of Cuba.

**NINA MOINI:** If you could, would you talk a little bit about the role of the US and what's going on in Cuba right now, and a little bit more about what led to the blockade?

**TEDDIE** Certainly. So the blockade-- or the US relationship with Cuba have been in distress ever since the revolution of  
**POTTER:** 1959. There's been multiple approaches to try to turn over the government.

Most recently, since about 2017, the sanctions have been extremely harsh, impacting Cuba's ability to conduct normal trade relations, to have tourism with other nations, and for us to access Cuba's remarkable pharmaceutical innovations. So we are all suffering from this approach to trying to flip the government in Cuba.

**NINA MOINI:** Hm. So I mentioned at the top there that you were just in Cuba couple of weeks ago. What can you share with us about what you saw?

**TEDDIE** Certainly. So the harsh sanctions of the past, oh, five, six, seven years have been having remarkable impact as  
**POTTER:** far as rolling blackouts. But now, it's total blackouts. So you drive through their large city, their capital city, Havana, at night, it's black, and I have never seen a city absolutely black.

No street lights. Large apartment buildings with no lights on. No way to navigate safely in a neighborhood, walk on the sidewalk, cross the road. Very, very few cars on the road because gasoline. We talk about our prices going up, their prices are just exorbitant, if they can even get gas. And they're waiting weeks and weeks to be able to attain gas for vehicles.

Buses have stopped running for the most part. There's a few buses to bring workers, but not many. Students are staying home because school buses can't be-- aren't on the road. People are scrambling to keep their refrigeration going so that they don't have spoiled food.

Our colleagues there said they have about maybe an hour or two of electricity at 2:30 in the morning. So they all sleep fitfully, waiting for the electricity to kick in so they can start their rice and beans for the day, so they can pump their water because the water is on electric pumps, and so that they can recharge their phones and their computers so they can be functional at work. They're exhausted.

And garbage is piling up because there aren't garbage trucks-- fuel for garbage trucks to pick up the garbage. So there's increased vector-borne or mosquito-borne diseases that are also part of the problem. We're heading into the severe heat of Cuba, and that's going to be difficult without fans and without air conditioning to keep people comfortable.

**NINA MOINI:** Wow, that sounds just very exhausting indeed. But Cuba had rolling blackouts due to power issues long before this latest oil blockade by the US a couple months ago. How is this more severe? What are you hearing from people about how this is just very different?

**TEDDIE POTTER:** Well, in the past, it was scheduled blackouts. So there were oil shortages, and they primarily got their oil from Venezuela, and they didn't have huge amounts of oil coming in. And so they had scheduled blackouts. So you knew that your neighborhood was going to have a blackout from 12:00 noon to 6:00 PM on a Tuesday and the following Friday.

This is everyone in the entire city, no matter how old they are, no matter how young they are, being impacted. It is not just people who can't afford to pay bills, it is all people having limitations on the energy that they have access to.

So we had conversations with their brilliant scientists, and the same scientists, the brilliant people are walking an hour or to work in an hour to two hours to get home at night because of lack of fuel to transport people. So it is the worst condition I have ever seen, and very humane to cut a nation off from its oil supplies.

**NINA MOINI:** And then you are focused with your medical background as a professional on hospitals and pregnant people who really need support. I mean, how is this situation impacting the ability for people to get any type of care that they need?

**TEDDIE POTTER:** Well, absolutely. So it's limiting incubator use. So high-risk infants in the hospitals are having difficulty. They're having difficulty transporting dialysis patients to their routine dialysis services. There's a severe shortage of medications because of trade blocks, et cetera. There's 96,000 surgeries that have been postponed, 11,000 of which have been surgeries for children. And so our concern is for the pregnant women.

Before all this happened, Cuba has had remarkable results in protecting mothers and infants. As a matter of fact, their rates of infant mortality were so low that they were the envy of the developed nations. Their rates of infant mortality were lower than the US.

Since the imposition of these harsh sanctions, their infant mortality-- now we're talking about the lives of infants and babies, has doubled. The death rate has doubled. So we're very, very concerned about that.

One of the reasons that has allowed women to thrive as they're in pregnancies is they're invited-- it's not compulsory, but they're invited to go and live their third trimester in maternity homes.

**NINA MOINI:** Hm.

**TEDDIE POTTER:** So if they have-- they're delivering twins or triplets, or they have high blood pressure or diabetes, or another condition that is complicating-- complicates births, their doctor and their nurse recommend that they-- will refer them to a maternity home. And every municipality has a maternity home.

The maternity-- the women go there, they sleep there, they eat there, they get very good food, their specialists come and see them, they have air conditioning and fans, they have classes that teach them about breastfeeding and care for their children, and it's just this remarkable wraparound program. But now the maternity homes don't have electricity. So at night, it's pitch black, and the women are at risk of falling.

There's a risk-- because of the heat going up, there's no air conditioning, there's no fans. The fans are needed to keep the mosquitoes away, so there's increased rates of dengue and chikungunya virus. They are unable to access emergency services. They're unable to call their families and children that are still at home. So as I said, infant mortality rate has doubled.

**NINA MOINI:** Teddie, I wonder what people can do to help. I didn't know that Minnesota has these rich ties to Cuba-- or more ties than I had heard about. But tell us a little bit about that connection, and then how people can help from afar.

**TEDDIE POTTER:** Well, Minnesotans really have big hearts, and we really do recognize that we want to respect humanity, and we really want basic human rights for all people, including health, education, et cetera. That's just baked in to who we are as citizens of Minnesota.

So it was not surprising that our understanding aligns well with the understanding in Cuba that all people have a right to education, all people have a right to food, good housing, et cetera.

So we have been sending health professionals to learn from Cuba for a very long time, as well as farmers. People from-- representatives from Minnesota have gone down there because there's a real advantage to Minnesota engaging Cuba.

If we open trade relationships, we would be having a 166% increase on our exports of rice, corn, and soybeans to Cuba. That's great for farmers. Cuba has one of the highest vaccination rates in the world. 98% of their citizens are vaccinated with 13 vaccines. Not compulsory, but willingly vaccinated, which is great-- it would be great for Minnesota.

And then we have a lot of-- in Minnesota, we have lung cancer patients, we have people who have diabetic foot ulcers, and we have over 100,000 people living with Alzheimer's. And Cuba has drugs to address each of these, and we can't purchase those drugs.

So it is a health issue both directions, what we're doing to the people, and what's coming back to us, and what's limiting us to keep our health thriving in Minnesota.

So what are we doing with MEDICC? We are raising money right now. It's a campaign called Light for Life. We're collecting donations. They are fully compliant with US regulations. They're tax-deductible. We're collecting donations to install solar panels on top of maternity homes to keep the lights on, protecting the women that are most vulnerable.

**NINA MOINI:** All right, Teddie, I really appreciate you coming on *Minnesota Now* and telling us about your work. And I hope that you will check in with us again in a short time, thank you.

**TEDDIE** Thank you so much for inviting me.

**POTTER:**

**NINA MOINI:** That was Teddie Potter, the Executive Director of the Medical Education Cooperation with Cuba.