



State of Minnesota

8/7/2020

Dear Governor Walz,

We are writing to you about the COVID-19 pandemic that is sweeping the country. As you know, it has resulted in our nation having the [highest death toll and the highest number of confirmed cases](#) in the world. Although Minnesota has done relatively well compared to other states, the pandemic now appears to have a renewed energy that threatens to cross state borders in an attack that may well turn into the "[forest fire](#)" that Dr. Michael Osterholm predicts is looming.

We also know that, as put recently by a [former top national security official](#), "At a time when our country needs an orchestrated, coordinated, all-hands-on-deck response, there is simply no hand on the tiller, and . . . unfortunately, we can't keep waiting for the administration."

Given the gravity of the situation, we believe that it's time to begin considering collaborating and working with partners outside of our usual frame of reference and comfort zone.

To that end, shortly before the legislature adjourned sine die at the end of May, Senator Sandy Pappas authored [S.F. 4619](#), a resolution that would help to address that need. It urged our leadership to look beyond our traditional partnerships and consider reaching out to the nation of Cuba. The companion bill, [H.F. 4690](#), was introduced in the House by Representative John Lesch.

The resolution lays out a number of reasons for its proposal, concluding, in part, that,

"the people of Minnesota and the United States remain at risk from the infectious disease; the country's death rate from the virus ranks among the highest in the world and a united, cooperative, and engaged response by the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government is required to address the disaster."

It then called on you, Governor Walz, to

"direct the Department of Health and other agencies, as appropriate, to investigate the potential for collaborating with Cuba to obtain crucial assistance and expertise for Minnesota residents in the midst of the pandemic."

As you may be aware, Senator Pappas has for some years been interested in the unique developments that have occurred in Cuba with regard to its medical system and biotechnology research and development and has led three delegations to Cuba to learn more about them.

As she and others now know, and as set out in the resolution, Cuba has [virtually conquered](#) COVID-19 and, as of July 6, with a population of 11.3 million people, had tallied a cumulative death toll of only 86 and a total number of cases of 2,380. The resolution further points out that, by the end of April, [50 countries](#) had requested help from Cuba to combat the virus, with the hard-hit province of Lombardy in Italy among the first to receive the aid. More than [80 countries](#) have also requested assistance with Cuba's pharmaceuticals and there are currently [37 Cuban medical brigades in 30 countries](#) fighting COVID-19.

The resolution also recognizes the fact that Cuba has a [long history of medical aid](#) to other countries during the Ebola, swine flu, dengue and other epidemics where it has sent its specially trained Henry Reeve brigades, often at no cost, to many of the world's poorest nations. It goes on to discuss the success that Cuba has had with its research into COVID-19 treatments. The Interferon Alpha-2B Recombinant drug is the best known, but they are also working with immunity-boosting drugs and other therapies, with "[70 ongoing research protocols in Cuba related to COVID-19.](#)" Unfortunately, these drugs are not yet available here due to the US embargo, although clinical trials are going on in other countries that could make them available in the US at some point.

However, Cuba's success in treating the pandemic both at home and in other countries, is not only due to its biotechnology sector, but also has to do with its commitment to a [high standard of public health care](#), with a system that involves neighborhood meetings, door-to-door health checks, testing, contact tracing and quarantining,

While the US embargo clearly creates challenges, in 2016 Cuba and the US negotiated an important [memorandum of understanding](#) intended to "enhance and expand cooperative efforts in health and biomedical sciences" between the two countries. This agreement has not been withdrawn and remains in force today. In addition, as we've learned from stories about Cuban innovation and resourcefulness over the recent years of shortages and lack of resources, we believe there may be unforeseen ways we could benefit from working with its doctors and scientists.

A recent development has been the offer by [MEDICC](#), an organization with a 30 year history of supporting US-Cuba health care collaborations, to work with faculty at the University of Minnesota to focus on learning from Cuba's experience with COVID-19. It is anticipated that the initial product of the faculty members' work with MEDICC would be a virtual educational forum for researchers, practitioners and policy leaders.

We should also note that although the Minnesota resolution urging collaboration with Cuba was not introduced in time to schedule a hearing, the news of its introduction was met with great enthusiasm by a number of Cuban newspapers and radio and television stations as well as in [Granma](#), the principal news outlet for the Cuban government.

Minnesota has been a leader in medical development and technology over the years and we now have the possibility of writing a new chapter in that history by reaching out to a country that has likewise become a leader in science and technology while also demonstrating a singular humanity towards other nations in need.



State of Minnesota

As the state that now may be best known as the place where George Floyd was murdered, we have an obligation to our People of Color and Indigenous communities to demonstrate our commitment to addressing the vast disparity of the pandemic's impact on their populations. Our proposal may present one of the best opportunities to do that by acknowledging and learning from a country whose medical brigades and outreach have brought lifesaving assistance to the poorest and least advantaged people in the world.

In conclusion, we would like to share our appreciation of your outstanding leadership, Governor Walz, in this current crisis, and urge you to consider building upon that legacy by exploring this unique opportunity to reach out to our country's neighbor to the south.

Sincerely,

Senator Sandy Pappas
Representative Mary Kunesh-Podein
Representative Kristin Bahner
Senator Chuck Wiger
Representative Aisha Gomez
Representative Hodan Hassan

Senator Patricia Torres Ray
Senator Carolyn Laine
Senator Chris Eaton
Representative Sandra Masin
Representative John Lesch