



## Containers 4 Cuba

A project to deliver much needed medical supplies and equipment to the people of Cuba

# A Cuban Solidarity Project

## Executive Summary

The Containers 4 Cuba project concept came about while three retired CAW union members were in Cuba with the Calixto Garcia Solidarity Brigade in 2021. While visiting a hospital in Holguin, the medical director was asked what was needed. His answer was **“everything!”**

As a result, we have been working ever since in order to find ways to help.

Our research has helped us make contact with several people and organizations around Ontario that do this type of humanitarian work, but most do it on a relatively small scale. We have also found out that the availability of surplus equipment and supplies is overwhelming and they would otherwise go to waste if not collected and shipped where it is most needed.

Organizations such as Together for Cuba, the Juan Gualberto Gomez Association of Cubans in Toronto, the Canadian Network on Cuba, Not Just Tourists and other groups have been working for years gathering and sending tons of supplies by ship, by freight and with individual tourists.

We would like to help ramp up deliveries of life saving medical aid that is often made available free of charge. As such we would be contributing to the important work these groups are doing but on a much larger and more efficient scale by sending shipping containers full of medical aid, on a more regular basis, to Cuba.

This is where you and/or your organization come in.

## Historical Context

The U.S.-Cuba relationship has been plagued by distrust and antagonism since 1898, when U.S. forces occupied Cuba until 1902, from 1906 to 1909, and again from 1917 to 1922. Cuba was subsequently ruled by U.S. backed dictators most of the time until 1959, when the Cuban Revolution was won.

The United States and Cuba have had a strained relationship since the Cuban people, led by Fidel Castro, overthrew the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista more than six decades ago.

The United States recognized Fidel Castro’s government but began imposing economic penalties, starting with the sugar quota which permitted duty free U.S. imports of Cuban sugar.

Cuba retaliated by nationalizing sugar plantations owned by U.S. corporations and sought new trading partners, including the Soviet Union. After slashing Cuban sugar imports, Washington instituted a ban on nearly all U.S. exports to Cuba, which President John F. Kennedy expanded into a full economic embargo that included stringent travel restrictions.

Successive U.S. administrations have since pursued policies intended to isolate the island country economically and diplomatically.

Despite the U.S. embargo Cuba has achieved a great deal, including the eradication of illiteracy, establishing universal health care, free education up to and including the post graduate level and many other social benefits. However, with the dissolution of the USSR and the East European socialist block, an extended period of economic crisis in Cuba began in 1991, known as the Special Period, which was at its most severe in the early to mid-90s.

The Special Period caused extreme rationing of food, shortages of gasoline and diesel fuel and a transformation to urban organic farming. The fuel shortages caused a massive decline in the island's transportation capability and severe electricity blackouts. It declined in severity near the end of the decade following the election of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela because Cuba and Venezuela became primary trading partners.

The difficulties brought on by the US embargo and the fall of the Soviet Union resulted in very difficult times for the Cuban population. However, Cubans and their government are very resourceful and resilient.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation has again worsened for the Cuban people. Supply chain shortages coupled with the resulting global economic downturn have caused a decline in tourism, which Cuba, like other Caribbean nations, relies upon heavily. The shortage of medical equipment and supplies have exacerbated conditions in Cuba.

### **The Project**

With your financial assistance, the project would help us organize the collection of medical supplies and equipment from various hospitals, long-term care homes as well as other businesses and organizations across Ontario. Most of the supplies and equipment are stock that these organizations would either donate, recycle or discard to landfill.

The project would make use of existing storage facilities in the St. Catharines warehouse where the supplies and equipment would be held until there is enough aid to fill the shipping containers. In addition, there will be a need to help pay for transportation and other logistical needs, both here and in Cuba.

The acquisition of stock and loading of the container would be undertaken by a group of volunteers from the Association of Cubans in Toronto, the Warehouse of Hope in St. Catharines, as well as other community groups and union locals that would be willing to assist.

Once a container is full, a trucking company would pick it up, deliver it to be loaded onto a freight train enroute to the port in Halifax, Nova Scotia. It would then be shipped to Cuba and distributed by MINSAP.

Some of the supplies and equipment that are shipped are:

Hospital beds, mattresses, stretchers, wheelchairs, walkers, crutches, canes, syringes, gauze, disinfectant, vitamins and various medication.

## The Proponents

In 2018, a small group of Canadians with the assistance of The Cuban Institute of Friendship with the Peoples (ICAP) Holguin formalized a solidarity brigade. ICAP is the veteran Cuban organization created shortly after the triumph of Revolution by Fidel Castro to explain to the world what was actually happening in Cuba.

The Brigade is named in honour of Major General Calixto Garcia, the only Cuban general to have fought in all three wars of independence from Spain between 1868 and 1898.

The Calixto Garcia Solidarity Brigade has been traveling to Cuba and engaging with organizations in the eastern provinces since 2018. It was during these solidarity engagements with the Cuban people that many of their needs were identified.

Three members of the Calixto Garcia Brigade, all retired from the CAW, now UNIFOR, Ken Luckhardt, Ben Lefebvre and Colin Argyle decided to do something to help the healthcare system in Cuba. They felt that our Canadian unions and other organizations could play a significant role in assisting our efforts.

Colin Argyle was a member of CAW Local 303 where he served as Benefits Representative and Workers' Compensation Advocate before transferring to Local 222 in Oshawa in 1993. He was then seconded to the OFL as Director of its WCB Training Project (ODRT).

Ben Lefebvre was a founding member of CAW Local 599 in Timmins where he served the membership for 9 years as full-time Bargaining Committee Chair. Ben is presently on municipal council in Iroquois Falls, Ontario and is one of the Canadian coordinators of the Calixto Garcia Solidarity Brigade.

Ken Luckhardt was a National Representative in the CAW International Department which housed the Social Justice Fund (SJF). In that capacity he was involved in administering and overseeing many SJF funded projects.

There is presently a group of volunteers led by Alex and Tania Capano in Scarborough, Ontario, that have experience in coordinating the gathering of supplies and equipment, loading the container and having it picked up and sent to Cuba. They have already shipped fourteen containers to the island so far, mostly at their own expense.

We are very fortunate to have Tania and Alex's skill, knowledge and logistical expertise at our disposal. The Niagara Warehouse of Hope based in St. Catharines, Ontario has agreed to work with everyone involved in order to help with our project.

We have also continued to reach out to other individuals and groups that share our passion to provide this important life saving humanitarian aid to Cuba.

## **Niagara Warehouse of Hope**

The Niagara Warehouse of Hope is a registered charity founded in 1989 by Mary and Ted van der Zalm Sr. A Board of Directors runs the organization and is supported by a group of 80 to 100 volunteers. The Board meets periodically to discuss finances, inventory and what donations are going to be shipped to which selected country.

The Organization collects donations of used medical supplies and equipment, clothing, bedding and food from within the community and surrounding area.

Their warehouse is approximately 1500 square feet which has a large area for storing and sorting the various donations. There are smaller rooms for a computer workshop, an eyeglass sorting and processing workshop, a sewing workshop and a room made available for Not Just Tourists. The warehouse is open from 8:30 am to 12 noon Tuesdays and Thursdays.

The Niagara Warehouse of Hope has shipped over 56 shipping containers to 12 different countries in need around the world.

They are linked up with many other charities within the Niagara region and surrounding communities.

Website: [www.nwoh.ca](http://www.nwoh.ca)

## **Logistics**

In order to facilitate the gathering of medical supplies and equipment the project will need to help pay the cost of rental trucks large enough to accommodate whatever has to be picked up from the various donor organizations and delivered to St. Catharines where the Warehouse of Hope is located.

A preliminary meeting was held in December 2022 with the leadership of the Cuban Friendship Institute (ICAP) in Holguin. ICAP along with the Cuban Ministry of Public Health (MINSAP) will help coordinate the logistics, destinations and delivery of the medical aid to the various Cuban institutions with the help of the Ministry of Public Health (MINSAP).

MINSAP representatives in Holguin have agreed to receive, store, sort and distribute the equipment and supplies to where it is most needed across the country. ICAP and MINSAP will also provide an up-to-date list of what is most needed throughout the term of the project.

## **Budget**

It is estimated at this time that the cost to ship a 40-foot container of medical supplies and equipment to Cuba is in the \$8,000 to \$10,000 price range. The cost can vary depending on availability of shipping containers, varying fuel charges, availability and handling costs. It is expected that regular shipment schedules will help stabilize associated costs.

Following is a list of where the funding will be allocated.

- Container shipping costs
- Truck rental
- Fuel costs in Ontario and Cuba
- Packaging material (boxes, tape etc.)
- Meals for volunteers

### **Recognition**

Quarterly reports complete with pictures and/or videos will be provided to the contributing unions, union locals as well as to other individuals and organizations upon request or necessity.

The proponents would be pleased to attend membership meetings to explain the project and garner support for this important humanitarian initiative.

### **Images of some of the medical equipment previously shipped.**







Container is almost loaded and ready for shipment to Cuba

Alex and Tania Capano



Left to right:

Ken Luckhardt, Colin Argyle, Ben Lefebvre (December 2021)





**Cuba thanks  
Canada!**

