

# Pacemakers for Cuba, a unique effort to save lives

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Bob Schwartz, Global Health Partners.

More than 300 pacemakers will reach Cuban institutions thanks to a campaign in

the United States and Europe aimed at supporting the health system in one of its most urgent needs.

The initiative, coordinated by the non-profit organizations Global Health Partners (GHP) and MediCuba Europe, is a unique effort, according to Bob Schwartz, vice-president of the former and with a long history of solidarity work with the Ministry of Public Health (Minsap).

In an interview with Prensa Latina, Schwartz described the project as one of the most valuable ones promoted by GHP in three decades of work in the Antillean country.

At the beginning of May, both organizations announced their intention to raise \$150,000 to send 300 pacemakers to five hospitals in four months. The goal was reached in the middle of that period. By the second month, the amount exceeded \$187,000.

During COVID-19, Global Health Partners launched a similar initiative to support immunization with Cuban vaccines, which raised six million syringes in a few months.

“In some ways, it’s similar to that project that captured the same imperative, but for cardiac patients a pacemaker is a matter of life and death,” he remarked.

Both projects, however, had to overcome restrictions imposed by the United States that limit access to a large part of the market and prevent the shipment to Cuba of equipment with more than 10 percent of U.S. components.

## **A respite for Cuba**

The campaign coincides with a particularly sensitive moment for the health system in the Caribbean country. According to figures published by GHP, Cubans with heart

disease face a three-year wait for pacemakers because of the U.S. encirclement policy that prevents the country from buying these devices on the market.

Some 70 elderly Cubans cannot leave their hospital beds until they receive pacemakers, while the country's overall demand is estimated at about 2,000 patients in need.

In particular, Cuba's inclusion on the U.S. list of alleged sponsors of terrorism hinders the nation's access to the international banking system and limits its supply of foreign exchange.

It also obstructs the ability to purchase pacemakers from international suppliers in a market dominated by U.S. industry.

"We made the decision to launch this campaign not as a substitute, but to give Cuba a break and take some pressure off the Ministry of Public Health," Schwartz explained.

The idea is to address the most serious cases of patients and acquire equipment in Europe with the support of MediCuba Europe and the coalition to save lives, which brings together a dozen organizations in the United States opposed to the blockade, he said.

### **Three years later on the list**

The impact of sanctions on Cuba's healthcare system poses difficult obstacles such as relationships with providers, imports and access to nearby markets to high transportation costs.

The designation as an alleged terrorist state prevents, in particular, access to most banks or the Swift system for electronic payments worldwide.

Cuba was first included on the US State Department's list of sponsors of terrorism during the first term of President Ronald Reagan (1980-1982).

In 2015, then-President Barack Obama considered that designation to be without merit and withdrew it. However, his successor, Donald Trump, reinstated it before leaving the White House.

It has since remained in that relationship during Joe Biden's presidency, despite calls for him to rectify that policy.

Cuba's exit would represent a major relief for the work of Global Health Partners and the Ministry of Health.

During the campaign to carry syringes, the organization paid almost four times as much for them in the United States because of the fears of vendors who knew they would be going to Cuba, Schwartz confessed.

Without the designation, he added, the banking system would open up to Cuba, transportation costs would be drastically reduced, and they would be able to access more markets.

"The truth is there is no reason to keep Cuba on the terrorist list. No reason to return it to begin with. The Trump administration did it in a very vindictive way and here we are three years later."

### **Three decades of work in Cuba**

In all his years of work with Cuba, Schwartz has known all too well the complex web of obstacles to the shipment of medicines, equipment, or medical supplies to the largest of the Antilles.

From the convoluted journeys through third and fourth countries to send a shipment

when it is impossible to do so directly to the request for more than 60 licenses in three decades to acquire equipment with more than 10 percent U.S. components.

"If the designation as a sponsor of terrorism did not exist, if the blockade did not exist, the truth is that there would be no need for the work we do, because Cuba could solve all the problems on its own," assured the also consultant to the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

Even with these obstacles, the representative ratified the organization's commitment to maintain its work in the Caribbean nation with the premise of "promising less and delivering more". "I don't think there is any case in which I have told Minsap that we are going to do something that we haven't done; our word is important to us," he acknowledged.

Removing Cuba from the list of sponsors of terrorism and ending restrictions on activities such as tourism or travel would do much to improve the lives of every Cuban, he further considered.

"I am amazed at what they have been able to accomplish with the limited resources they have."

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Source: [Prensa Latina](#), translation [Resumen Latinoamericano - English](#)

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