



March 22, 2016

## Cuba and America

With President Obama's historic trip to Cuba this week, we have the chance to look at Cuba and its role in our hemisphere and in our world. It also gives us a chance to look at our country with new eyes. President Obama declared, "This is a new day –es un nuevo dia - between our two countries", with the possibilities of an increase in the exchange of trade and of ideas.

I valued the opportunity to join five of my colleagues from the House when we visited Cuba in September 2011 in an effort to boost exports from Illinois to Cuba and to create much needed jobs for Illinoisans. It was worth it to me to pay for the trip myself. Our delegation of legislators met with Cuban leaders to establish connections to expand and increase the sale to Cuba of products such as agricultural, food, medical and pharmaceuticals which are manufactured in the state of Illinois.

I learned that in Cuba, education expenditures receive high priority, as Cuba spends 10 percent of its central budget on education, compared with 2 percent in the United States. I learned that Cuban schools are closely integrated with the community. Teachers are very active in the communities of the children that attend their schools, and build strong relationships with parents and families to enhance the learning process. Equal opportunity for a high quality education for all students has been the result of many years of concerted efforts and commitments by the government to its people.

On a visit to a Cuban medical school, I learned that some health standards in Cuba are as high as those in the United States at a fraction of the cost because the Cuban system emphasizes early intervention and public health. Clinic visits are free, and the focus is on preventing disease rather than treating it.

Beyond the possibilities in expanded trade between Cuba and the United States, this diplomatic breakthrough places in a new light issues of human rights in Cuba, with President Obama promoting freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of religion. In response, Cuban President Castro said that many things in Cuba are considered human rights, including the right to free quality healthcare and education and equal pay for men and women.

Cubans may not have total freedom, but they do have health care and education for all in the country. Obama's visit is not only good for Cuba but it is also good for the United States of America. We can learn something from them just as they can learn from us.

Sincerely,

La Shawn K. Ford  
State Representative-Eighth District