US joins Cuba in public health research

Wed, 10/11/2017 - 17:32
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The thawing of relations with Cuba makes it possible for Tulane University public health researchers to build collaborations with public health experts there. Tulane student Alejandra Marks is the first U.S. student to conduct NIH-funded research under the guidance of mentors from the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine and a mentor with the National School of Public Health in Havana, Cuba.

Marks, a native of Athens, Ohio, is currently in Cuba on an eight-week project under the umbrella of the Minority Health and Health Disparities International Research and Training (MHIRT) grant to build a conceptual framework to understand the maternity waiting homes program in Cuba, and its spread throughout the world. Maternity waiting homes are places where pregnant women can live and receive care if they have obstetric complications, ordinarily live far away from a hospital, or do not have stable housing or adequate living conditions.

Together with her mentors, Marks has committed to writing three articles, two of which will be in Spanish, for publication in peer-reviewed journals drawing on her research.

"Conducting research under a mentor in another country is really fascinating," says Marks. "I'm learning a whole new system of methods and styles of conducting research. It really broadens your view."

Dr. Richard Oberhelman, professor and chair of global community health and behavioral sciences, directs the MHIRT program, which has enabled students to participate in research projects in Peru, Argentina, China, and Mexico. The first MHIRT program in Cuba launched May 23, 2016. Before beginning the research, the

Cuba program required approval from the National Institutes of Health, the Department of State, and the U.S. Treasury.

Marks' U.S.-based mentor Arachu Castro is the director of MHIRT in Cuba. Castro has been working to build the relationships inside Cuba that will support Marks' research and the MHIRT program.