ANCHORAGE, ALASKA—Nearly 200 state leaders, guests and Alaska legislative staff helped pack 32,000 meals for the Alaska Food Bank during The Council of State Governments’ service project Aug. 13.

The project—which began in 2010-11 during Tennessee Senate Majority Leader Mark Norris’ year as chair of CSG’s Southern Legislative Conference—grew this year to be part of Norris’ initiative as CSG national chair, “State Pathways to Prosperity.” The service project occurred on the final day of the joint CSG National and CSG West Annual Conference.

The “State Pathways to Prosperity” initiative focuses on workforce development through a national task force, which includes four subcommittees—children’s needs, people battling hunger and poor nutrition, veterans’ difficulties in meeting certification and degree requirements, and people who have been involved in the criminal justice system being disqualified from employment.

The service project is a way of raising awareness of, and provide help for, people who are hungry.

“Hunger is all too pervasive in every state and not only is it an obvious concern, but it also adversely affects so many opportunities in life,” Norris said. “It is a huge interference with children’s ability to learn and their parents’ ability to earn. We have not only a humanitarian need, but also a practical need to address the problem.”

CSG’s legislators prepared 20,000 meals during the 2011 SLC conference in Memphis, Tenn., during Norris’ year as chair. The SLC packaged 50,000 meals during its meeting in Little Rock, Ark., this July. With the Anchorage effort, Norris has been responsible for more than 100,000 meals packaged to help the hungry, said Floyd Hammer, president of Outreach Inc., of Iowa, which works with volunteer groups to package meals. Since the organization began in 2004, it has packaged and delivered more than 280 million meals, he said.

Hammer said the involvement of state leaders has helped spread awareness of the need.

“We have to raise awareness that there’s a problem, then we have to get people involved in the problem and be advocates when they go home,” he said. “We have people who have voices in places other people listen to.”
That’s important in places like Alaska, where one in seven people will feel food insecurity at least once during the year, according to Michael Miller, executive director of the Alaska Food Bank.

Mark Broadhurst, director of public affairs and government affairs for MARS Inc., the presenting sponsor of the service project, noted a direct link between helping to avert hunger and the primary focus of the “State Pathways to Prosperity” initiative.

“We want our children to be better nourished so they can do better in school. We know when our employees are well nourished, they’re more productive,” he said.

Alaska Rep. Craig Johnson, the 2014 CSG West chair, wasn’t surprised when he saw the number of state leaders lined up to help package food.

“The people we have here are public servants and give a lot back to their communities,” Johnson said, “so I’m not surprised at this because of the quality of people we have here.”

“I’m honored to have the national organization here to help feed hungry people in Alaska. It’s a problem everywhere and no one is immune from it,” Johnson said.

Norris was pleased to see the project he helped begin in the South spread across the country at this joint meeting of CSG West and the national organization.

“We’ve been able to amass great numbers of legislators all across the U.S. now in a practical way to begin addressing this particular problem,” said Norris. “It’s great to give back, but it’s also important to find ways to help people help themselves.”

That sentiment wasn’t lost on Colorado Sen. Nancy Todd, the 2014 CSG West chair-elect, who participated in the service project. She talked with Hammer about extending the tradition to CSG West and including it as part of the CSG West meeting next year in Vail, Colo.

“It’s about action,” she said, “not just talking about a problem, but showing we really believe in what we’re saying.”

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