A state-federal partnership that helps small- and medium-sized businesses in the Midwest reach global markets has been reauthorized through 2020. The State Trade and Export Program, or STEP, was included in legislation signed into law in February. It provides states with matching funds to help more small businesses export their goods and services.

“The STEP program has been instrumental in our shared mission to help more small businesses sell their products or services in the global marketplace,” says Andy Karellas, director of federal affairs for CSG and SIDO. “Those exports help support and create thousands of good-paying jobs in the states.”

SIDO helps manage the program at the state level.

In 2015, 40 states (all but Indiana and South Dakota in the Midwest) received STEP grants totaling $17.4 million. These grants support a variety of services — for example, participation in international trade missions, marketing products and campaigns, export trade show exhibits and export training.

“For our new-to-export companies, STEP has been the catalyst for them to enter the world of exporting through training and travels to international markets,” says Donavon Johnson, resource management group director with the North Dakota Trade Office.

“For the more experienced North Dakota exporters,” he adds, “the STEP program has allowed them to increase their sales by selling into new foreign markets.”

In Wisconsin, the state’s Economic Development Corporation is using part of the grant money to fund its ExporTech Graduate Assistance Project. Designed for businesses that already have an export expansion strategy, the “graduate-level” program offers education on compliance with foreign markets, translation services, and assessments on different global markets.

“Wisconsin is putting its STEP grant funds to good use, connecting Wisconsin companies with international market opportunities,” says Katy Sinnott, vice president of international business development for the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation.

STEP’s new authorization language also aims to strengthen coordination between federal trade promotion offices and the states. This, in turn, should help small firms navigate an export process that can involve more than 20 federal agencies.

Lastly, the U.S. Small Business Administration will now be required to analyze and report on the impact of future trade agreements on the nation’s smaller firms.