

Building partnerships with South Africa

States are forging ties with South Africa to promote trade, address social problems

BY CHRIS WHATLEY

South Africa is a country of contrasts. It is a place of enormous wealth and desperate poverty. It is the home of the world's first heart transplant and the epicenter of the world's worst HIV epidemic. Despite these dichotomies, the country has made impressive progress in overcoming the legacy of apartheid and improving the lives of its citizens.

In an effort to promote long-term partnerships between American states and their South African counterparts, a CSG delegation traveled to South Africa last September 14 to 23 to share lessons learned on economic development, education reform and combating HIV.

The 17-member delegation, led by Delaware Gov. Ruth Ann Minner, met with government officials and community leaders in the South African provinces of Gauteng, KwaZulu Natal and the Western Cape. The delegates held frank discussions with national and provincial leaders who are working to foster economic growth and create jobs while confronting HIV infection rates of more than 25 percent. They visited McCord Hospital in Durban to see how a dedicated group of health practitioners is working to address the epidemic despite limited resources. The group also met with local government officials, Zulu tradi-



Sen. Melvin "Kip" Holden of Louisiana with South African students

tional leaders, and educators in the Ugu district of KwaZulu Natal to see firsthand how local leaders are working to improve education in rural communities.

While the mission exposed the delegates to the severe challenges confronting South Africa, it also allowed the group to see and experience the country's enormous vitality. South Africa emerged from its turbulent transition to majority rule with a strong system of democratic government and a new constitution respected around the world for its commitment to civil liberties. Since 1994, the government has made important progress in extending basic services, including water, electricity and housing to millions of South Africans. The country has also begun an ambitious effort to foster long-term economic growth and has seen its trade expand rapidly with the United States and the rest of the globe.

However, the country still faces daunting problems, including persistent pover-

ty and low levels of education. The HIV crisis compounds all of these challenges. A single breadwinner often supports a large extended family. When the breadwinner gets sick the whole family is left destitute. Teachers have been particularly hard hit by the epidemic, denying children opportunities for education and depriving communities of vital leaders.

States have strong interests in the success of South Africa's democratic transition and economic revitalization. The country is the destination of more than one-half of U.S. exports to the African continent. Given these interests, state leaders from across the country have begun to build long-term partnerships with their South African counterparts designed both to promote trade and to foster cooperation on a wide range of important issues.

Six states maintain permanent trade offices in South Africa, including California, Florida, Illinois, Maryland,

CSG-South Africa Education Development Fund

The most poignant moment of the trip came during a visit to the Denver Zoar Primary School in the rural Ugu District of KwaZulu Natal Province. The delegates spent hours interacting with students and teachers and seeing first-hand how citizens of this rural community are struggling to improve the lives of their children. Although the school lacks books and some students walk to class each day without shoes, the school is blessed with a dedicated group of teachers and local leaders committed to improving education opportunities for its students.

However, the efforts of these leaders are set against a daunting backdrop of challenges, including the legacy of apartheid education policies that denied

basic resources to black students and a growing HIV epidemic that is striking down parents and teachers in the prime of their working lives. Despite these challenges local leaders are introducing new literacy programs and working to build a library for the school. These leaders recognize that improving basic education is an essential element of their ongoing efforts to promote economic growth, combat the scourge of AIDS, and improve the lives of children.

How you can help

CSG has been asked by the Ugu District Council and by local educators to assist in raising funds to help purchase books and other educational aids for the

new library. Even a small donation can have a tremendous impact in South Africa, given the needs and the strong value of the U.S. dollar. Individuals or organizations wishing to contribute to the fund can make a tax-deductible donation to The Council of State Governments (Tax ID: 36-6000818). CSG will dedicate 100 percent of the proceeds to purchasing books and materials for the Denver Zoar School. CSG will work with the U.S. Embassy in South Africa and the Ugu District Council to ensure that the program is administered effectively. Checks should be made payable to CSG and sent to Chris Whatley, CSG-Washington Office, 444 North Capitol, NW, Suite 401, Washington, D.C., 20001.

Missouri and Ohio. In addition, The Council of Great Lakes Governors maintains a multistate trade promotion office representing Indiana, Michigan, New York, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. These offices provide a platform for helping state businesses take advantage of the burgeoning trade between South Africa and the United States.


While trade promotion remains the primary motivation for state engagement in South Africa, states are also working to build broader partnerships with South Africans in order to help the country combat poverty and fight the scourge of HIV. Perhaps the best example of this type of partnership is the Massachusetts-Eastern Cape Health Care Task Force. The task force is an outgrowth of a state partnership agreement signed between Massachusetts and South Africa's Eastern Cape Province in 1997. The task force conducts regular exchanges of government officials and health care practitioners between Massachusetts and South Africa. These exchanges have been particularly effective in sharing best practices and technical information on combating HIV and other chronic diseases.

Chaired by Dr. Howard Kohn, commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, the task force includes a distinguished group of health care practition-

ers, legislators and community leaders. South Africa Partners, a Boston-based non-profit dedicated to promoting partnership with South Africa, serves as the secretariat for the task force.

CSG has drawn inspiration from the dedicated efforts of state leaders to promote partnership with South Africa. In an effort to build upon the success of its recent delegation, CSG has created a tax-deductible fund, entitled the CSG-South Africa Education Development Fund, to raise private resources to support education projects in the rural Ugu district. In

addition, CSG is working with the U.S. State Department and other agencies to assist delegations of South Africans visiting the United States.

Building long-term partnerships between the United States and South Africa is a priority that has been embraced by state leaders around the country. CSG is honored to support these growing partnerships. 

— Chris Whatley is director of international affairs at The Council of State Governments.



Maryland Delegate Anthony Brown learned first-hand about the challenges facing South African schools.