



CHANGING TIMES

*Longtime ERC Director Reflects on
His Tenure as Retirement Nears*

Alan Sokolow, director of The Council of State Governments' Eastern Regional Conference in New York City, will retire in December after 41 years. Sokolow, 65, began as a field representative and became director of the ERC in the fall of 1972. The Brooklyn native, who now lives in Montclair, N.J., spoke recently with *State News* about his tenure and the successes of CSG, as well as the changes he's witnessed in state government operations. Here are highlights of that interview.

By Mary Branham Dusenberry

As you look back on your tenure at CSG, what do you see as your most significant accomplishment?

“I think I’ve kind of sent the message to the whole organization of always trying to have us work as a team and believe in the esprit and treat colleagues as part of the family. I think I’ve also been successful in doing that with the Eastern leadership over the years so that their investment is deeper than just being a member of an organization, but feeling a significant commitment to its work and to its staff.”



Alan Sokolow, left, who is retiring from The Council of State Governments after 41 years, is pictured with New York Sen. Hugh Farley, center, and Wendell Hannaford, who will take over as ERC director upon Sokolow's retirement.

Specific things that we’ve accomplished over the years: One that we’ve grown the office in member jurisdictions. ... We have now 10 states, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico and six Canadian provinces. We have gone from 11 to 18 over this period, so that’s been very exciting growth for us.

Secondly, in the late 90s, we had an active program through our criminal justice project that was focusing on issues of over-representation of minorities in the prison system of the Northeast. It attracted a number of key Hispanic legislators who were part of National Hispanic Caucus of State

Legislators. That had been in existence for about 10 years but had fallen on harder days, and had a very minimal budget, no full-time staff, just struggling to survive. Four of the members ... approached me at one of our annual meetings in 1998 to see whether I would be willing to help them re-energize the organization. It was a real joy and labor of love.”

ERC has also created a number of affiliate organizations. Can you discuss those?

“We’re the only one that has a regional trade group of state trade directors that the states fund and we staff through this office. It was really the work of that regional group since 1999 or 2000, that created the decision by the national organization, SIDO (State International Development Organizations), to join CSG as an affiliate member.

In the late 90s ... we created a regional agriculture project that is also being funded primarily by our member states, called the Northeast States Association for Agricultural Stewardship. That’s provided a really significant support system for rural legislators in the region who are interested in northeast agriculture not only surviving, but growing. It was an uphill battle because we didn’t have the leverage or strength compared to other regions of the country where the powerful agriculture interests are based ...

On the criminal justice front I’m beyond thrilled about how the regional effort led by Mike Thompson has grown so phenomenally and astoundingly over the last 10 years and turning it into the Justice Center for national CSG. I’m very, very proud of the major accomplishments they’ve made in serving all of state government and being a wonderful example of our mission and purpose and providing very exciting and important technical assistance to the states.”

You have worked with state governments for 40 years. What has been the biggest change in state government operations or funding during that time?

“I would say the biggest change is the growth of partisanship and ideology in the political process. When I started, Republicans and Democrats could fight like cats and dogs over substantive issues in legislation, but when the debate on the floor was over,

they would get together and socialize and enjoy each other's company. There was a respect for the institution to support it.

I think over the years ... you see the parties separating both politically and socially. You see the use of the press to point the finger at the other side. It plays out for us in a very big way when participation in conferences becomes a political issue between the parties. Everyone gets very insecure to travel no matter what the value of the event is. So I think that's probably been the biggest—the loss of mutual trust and camaraderie in the legislative houses over the years. It's the big states and small states as well. It just poisons the atmosphere.

I've also seen the amazing growth of the influence of lobbyists in state capitals. It's a huge industry. That's certainly had an impact. Responding to that, at least in this region, is the growth of the conflict of interest and ethics laws and rules to challenge too cozy relationships. But all of that lends itself to people looking over their shoulders and not being as open with each other about working on things in a bipartisan fashion. You just rarely see that these days, which is really a shame."

What challenges are states facing that they may not have faced 40 years ago?

"I think one of the most significant challenges now is that there is not a federal government committed financially to the federal system in terms of domestic spending. It's a terrible struggle for the states to handle all the issues that they're confronted with without a strong federal presence, whether it's health care, education, transportation. ... The federal government continues to try to promulgate rules to have control over these areas but they've backed away because of, currently, the war or because of deficit and debt issues. Also, I guess, ideologically opposed to what's called big government, there has been a real shift of federal resources away from domestic spending, which has made it so difficult for the states.

The second, I think, is just the power of the anti-tax agenda that has made it impossible for state government, federal government to probably face the bigger challenges of the financial cost of doing domestic programs as needed, whether it's health care, infrastructure, education ... kind of starving themselves by not being able to

raise taxes when necessary. I think that's a very difficult problem for our whole government, state and federal, local. There's still a demand for valued services, but no willingness to be taxed to get that done.

I think the other is the continuing view by the media of government as almost the enemy, not the friend—the assumption that federal officials and state officials are venal and on the take and that less government is better. I think all of those themes still play large."

We are in the midst of another energy crisis, similar to the one in the 1970s. What is different about how states are responding this time as opposed to the 1970s?

"I think the states are doing everything they possibly can, particularly to protect the poorest of the poor, through the Low Income Home Energy Assistance. ... A lot of families in this region, particularly in New England, get their heat through home heating oil and kerosene, so there've been efforts by the states to supplement the federal spending. (While states are working on energy efficiency issues) the realities are without a very deep and committed federal program, it's very hard for the states to deal with this; and they have no control over the cost of gas or foreign oil. They can plug away at trying to do the right thing, but without a federal commitment to alternative fuels and auto efficiency standards and climate change. ... The states are trying but you probably make difference at the edges, I think, without a major national leadership to make this a high priority, almost like a Marshall plan decision at becoming energy independent. The resources at the states are limited and they need the federal government resources to make a significant difference."

How has the relationship between the state and federal governments changed over the years?

"In the Nixon administration there was a great deal of commitments to the federalism idea and the grants programs domestically and trying to work through the regionalization of the federal agencies to support the states and work as teams. I think that was a highlight until, when the Reagan administration came in, there was less ambition to do so. I think to this day, there seems to be

greater effort by the feds to have a much bigger say in education than it ever had and yet not providing the resources to make the kind of changes that were contemplated.

I'm not sure where the Supreme Court is going to go on the 10th amendment. Losing the Sandra Day O'Connors of the world is a tough hit for the states because she was very supportive of states' rights in the best sense of that phrase. I'm not sure that's going to continue with the court.

And in the transportation area, the Bush administration is basically on a path to privatize or turn over the responsibilities of transportation to the states and probably with a grants program that is not enough for the states to do the job. There's not a belief in the national transportation system. When you think back to the '50s with Eisenhower and the interstate highway system, it's kind of turned on its head. There's much less investment or perception that there's a national system and that it needs to be invested in and protected by the national government."

Is there a particular policy issue that creates more challenges for state government than other issues?

"I think we're not going to get to the bottom of our domestic needs without a committed federal government that's in much better economic shape to support the states. I think it's going to be an ongoing struggle to make change, but I think it's going to be on the edges and incremental and never get to the bottom of how to deal with this. Whether it's housing or transportation, we're losing ground."

—Mary Branham Dusenberry conducted the interview and is managing editor of State News.



Alan Sokolow discussed the growth of The Council of State Governments Eastern Regional Conference's jurisdictions, as well as the ERC associates program and changes in the relationships between the national CSG headquarters and the regions, in greater depth. Visit Capitol Comments, CSG's blog, for more from the interview.