MICHAEL SMITH: When you are working in a food bank and you're rolling up your sleeves, your differences fly out the window. I grew up in the crack epidemic that happened in the 80s and a lot of violence that happened in inner city communities. And while we didn't have a whole lot of money, what we had was a village that loved me.

What I have seen in the past two years, when I looked at what we've gone through during the pandemic, I have seen Americans help Americans. Volunteering and service can take you from this pathway from charity to justice. It helps to build a muscle.

And I think that is the beauty of AmeriCorps. We are meeting urgent needs right now, but we also provide this transformative experience for our AmeriCorps members that go on to continue to do great things for the country.

We've got tough questions to ask ourselves. What's at stake for AmeriCorps is what's at stake for America.

BOB SAFIAN: That's Michael Smith, CEO of AmeriCorps, the U.S. government agency that facilitates volunteer efforts across the nation of tens of thousands of Americans every year.

Dramatically bigger than the Peacecorps, AmeriCorps supports disaster relief as well as local community organizations, while disbursing billions of dollars to nonprofits.

I'm Bob Safian, former editor of Fast Company, founder of The Flux Group, and host of Masters of Scale: Rapid Response.

I wanted to talk to Michael because, at a time of heightened national divisiveness, Michael positions volunteering as an essential glue that helps soothe wounds in the culture and the marketplace, bridging our differences and cultivating our empathy.

Aiming to be what he calls a force multiplier, AmeriCorps is emphasizing impact over volume as a conduit to scale.

There are leadership lessons on building momentum through giving, with a toolkit that includes public-private partnerships, training and full-time work opportunities for volunteers, and creating what he describes as a service muscle in those who serve.
Speaking live at the 2022 Social Innovation Summit in Washington D.C., we dig into Americorps past, present, and future, and the tricky exercise of scaling lasting change that matters.

[THEME MUSIC]

SAFIAN: I'm Bob Safian, and I'm here with Michael Smith, the CEO of AmeriCorps, the U.S. government agency dedicated to volunteering and national service. We are live at the Social Innovation Summit in D.C. Michael, thank you for joining us.

SMITH: Thank you for allowing me to be here. Thanks for allowing us to talk about the work we're doing at AmeriCorps.

SAFIAN: So AmeriCorps is a big canvas. You aid in disaster relief and recovery from Katrina to Sandy to COVID. You engage citizens as volunteers, cultivating national empathy, you expose volunteers to new opportunities. I saw something, a group that recently volunteered, 70% of them got hired by FEMA. And of course, you disperse funds to 2,500 or so grantees from Habitat for Humanity, American Red Cross, and probably a bunch of social impact folks who are here in this room, or maybe they want to be on that list.

SMITH: Yes.

SAFIAN: You have been in this job since January…

SMITH: I have.

SAFIAN: …five months. So my opening question is what about AmeriCorps is different today?

SMITH: We were launched during the Clinton administration 30 years ago. But our history goes all the way back to the 1960s. And so the idea of AmeriCorps was: how do we bring together all of the do-gooding that is happening across the federal government? How can we become this place to be a force multiplier for people that want to do good and give back to their community? So we now have 250,000 AmeriCorps members and senior volunteers that are serving in 40,000 locations. And we have more than 1.2 million alumni. So chances are, if there is a challenge at a community and there are people doing something about it, AmeriCorps members are at the heart.

So on my watch, there are three things that have bubbled up. One is a real focus on impact. How do we make sure that when we look back 20 years from now, we're not just applauding ourselves for how many AmeriCorps members we're serving; we're not applauding ourselves for how many bowls of soup were handed out; but we're really looking at the measurable, tangible impact that we're having on intransient systems all across the country.
The other thing that's really important for us right now is equity, equity, equity. How do we make sure that AmeriCorps reflects the rich diversity of our communities and the country? And in order to do that, we have to address some barriers. Some AmeriCorps members get stipends. Is it enough so that they can volunteer full time? We've got AmeriCorps members that are giving 1,700 hours in service as AmeriCorps members, but also keep a roof over their head and have food in their bellies. How do we make sure that there are more diverse BIPOC and tribal and rural and inner city grantees? So we've got to remove those barriers.

And the other thing that we are really excited about on my watch is making sure that AmeriCorps is playing an even more central role to bridging our differences and really helping us to work against polarization. There is something when there is a challenge at hand, when you are responding to a disaster, when you are working in a food bank and you're rolling up your sleeves together to address those issues, your differences fly out the window. Your political affiliation, where you grew up, all of those things fall out the window and you see each other, you see each other's humanity. So impact, equity, and bridging divides are really important for us at this time.

SAFIAN: You have connections personally to volunteers and to national service. Is that impacting the way you lead the organization differently?

SMITH: I'm from Western Massachusetts. My parents were both 16 years old when I was born. We were poor. We didn't have a whole lot of money. I grew up in the crack epidemic that happened in the 80s and a lot of violence that happened in inner city communities. And while we didn't have a whole lot of money, what we had was a village that loved me, that loved kids like me, and that took care of each other. You're talking about people that had to work two to three jobs to make ends meet. The circumstances were hard. Life, the odds were stacked against them, but they gave their all to kids like me so that we could have a chance so that we can dream.

And so one of the first things my mother did for me was she sent me to my Boys and Girls Club from the time I was a little kid. And she told me, she sent me to the Boys and Girls Club for cheap daycare, but what she didn't know is she would give me another family, aunts and uncles, the woman in the kitchen who realized Michael didn't like to be in the gym, so come make cookies with me, as you can see. And so all of a sudden I had these people that were a bridge over troubled water for me, who just watered into my life in ways that were remarkable. And when I think about the ability for me to be a political appointee for President Obama and President Biden, that's only possible because those folks who weren't looking for fame, they weren't looking for money, they were looking to make a difference. And so I bring that with me every single day to this job.

SAFIAN: When you think about your mission going forward, because you mentioned this about impact, is it about increasing the number of people who are engaged in this or getting the
people who are engaged to be more effective, to have more impact on them and on the communities they’re interacting with?

SMITH: AmeriCorps, as we said earlier, is the federal agency for volunteering and service. We have AmeriCorps VISTA; we have AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps; we have AmeriCorps state and national programs. But we are also charged with making sure that we are cultivating the spirit of volunteerism that is so important to this country.

What we have to do and what we will do on my watch is making sure that we’re focusing more on the type of impact. You could have tons of people all day long, doing lots of things. You could be serving soup and never find the root causes of hunger and homelessness. You could be working in schools and never find out why there’s systemic inequality, why those schools continue not to perform at the same level of more affluent schools. So we are really focused on impact.

We’ve got tough questions to ask ourselves. For instance, with AmeriCorps members, one of the challenges that we’re facing right now. Do we raise the stipend and have fewer AmeriCorps members or do we have a lot of AmeriCorps members that don’t have enough money to get by? Those are the questions that we’re wrestling with, and I think I’m going to choose impact — impact on the member and impact on the community at the end of the day.

SAFIAN: When you think about: is the state of service and volunteering, is it good? Are we at a high now? Are we at a low? Where are we as a country in the evolution and the execution of what volunteering can bring and can do?

SMITH: Sure. So the agency is responsible for working with the department of labor to put out an annual volunteer report on how many folks are volunteering in the nation. So what the data tells us is that it remained about flat. About a third of the nation volunteers on a regular basis with an organization. I have a problem with the question, because I think if I asked my grandmother who took care of me in between her two jobs, if I asked my uncle who was coaching the team on the weekend or taking all the other little kids when he took his kids as well, I don’t know if they would answer yes, that I am a volunteer with an organization on a regular basis.

So what I have seen in the past two years, when I looked at what we’ve gone through during the pandemic, I have seen Americans help Americans. I have seen people that were struggling create mutual aid networks. I have seen them distribute food. I have seen them take care of each other’s children. I have seen them create learning pods for people who were nurses and had to go to work. And so while we might be seeing a flat level of volunteering according to our data, I see Americans giving back to each other in record ways in ways that we’ve never seen before.
SAFIAN: We mentioned AmeriCorps disperses funds. As you talk about impact, are there any stories of partnerships, new partnerships that you feel like are having particular impact?

SMITH: Sure. So AmeriCorps distributes almost a billion dollars a year in funding to thousands of nonprofits across the country. And I am proud to report that every single federal dollar that we distribute, four come back in terms of return on investments, communities, private sector, and our partners that are adding to the federal dollar. So it's hard to pick what are some of the favorites. One, I would say we have almost 70,000 AmeriCorps members that are serving in K to 12 schools. And so some of the work that's happening around the country and the schools are just extraordinary.

People ask me what happened to AmeriCorps members during the pandemic. They were there; they were in community; they were a part of the community. And so when teachers had to figure out how to go virtual, AmeriCorps members had to figure out how to go virtual. When youth development workers had to figure out how to keep kids engaged and off the streets, AmeriCorps members were right there as well. Our AmeriCorps members that were working on public health, they had to figure out how they could be a support at that time as well.

We actually have a new program that was launched called Public Health AmeriCorps, which is responding to the needs of the pandemic. It's a 400 million partnership with the Centers for Disease Control. And it's trying to do two things. One, how do we use AmeriCorps members to address immediate urgent needs that communities have for public health right now, but also how do we deliberately train and build up the next generation of public health workers that are coming from underserved communities? And I think that is the beauty of AmeriCorps. We are meeting urgent needs right now, but we also provide this transformative experience for our AmeriCorps members that go on to continue to do great things for the country.

SAFIAN: AmeriCorps partners with private businesses as well, like a lot of the listeners to this podcast. Google you've worked with on a volunteer search engine, you worked with Toyota on the St. Bernard Project rebuilding homes. How important is engagement with private business to AmeriCorps activities today and to your vision of it in the future?

SMITH: I think what we have all learned in these past two years and even before that is no one sector, no one entity can do it alone. The challenges are great. And the only way we're going to meet them is if we all figure out what we can bring to the table uniquely. So throughout the history of AmeriCorps, it has been so important that we are working with state governments, with local governments, with small businesses, with big businesses, where we are all coming together to bring our best to make sure that we can make a difference.

What's really cool I think for the private sector is we have found that not only are AmeriCorps members loving AmeriCorps because it helps them to move into they're
testing things, they're experimenting with education, they're experimenting with public health, and then they find out that it helps them to get into a job. But employers love it because you get these young people that care, that are trained, that have had to work hard, that are responding to disaster, they're working these long hours, that have this spirit and ethos of service. And so they want to hire them. And so we're seeing all sorts of incredible... We have 600 employers of national service that are providing all sorts of hiring and recruitment preferences for AmeriCorps members just because of that.

SAFIAN: And so is your hope that that will accelerate? In other words, will more AmeriCorps volunteers be hired by businesses as time goes by?

SMITH: Yes. I think when we think about AmeriCorps of the future, it can't just be a one-off activity. This can't just be, I want to have a service experience. What we are hearing from the next generation is I want this to be a transformative experience. How can this help take me where I want to go? So, for instance, you mentioned when we were starting, we have this 10 year old partnership with FEMA called FEMA Corps. So FEMA gets to decide where our AmeriCorps national civilian community teams go to respond to disasters. They're still working in response to Hurricane Ida, for instance, right now. They're working to do mitigation. They're working to prevent fires to help fight firefighters. They're on the front lines in some places in hospitals to actually take some of the burden off of medical professionals.

So with FEMA Corps, we have seen in the 10 year history, more than 20% of our FEMA Corps members were hired by FEMA. And this graduating class, I was just at their graduation in Vicksburg, Mississippi, 70% were offered jobs. That's the future. That is the symbiotic relationship that is transformational for industry, for local government, and also for our AmeriCorps members.

[AD BREAK]

SAFIAN: Before the break we heard Michael Smith, CEO of Americorps, talk about the role of volunteerism in America and what it takes to generate deeper societal impact.

Now he talks about how the rising pressure on all organizations to address social action is effecting Americorps’ agenda, and the need for leaders to focus on binding communities together.

He also shares lessons from his time in the Obama White House, and advice on how to scale impact to create true structural change, in a crisis environment and beyond.

Your organization in some ways is crisis-focused. Traditionally it evolved around natural disasters. With COVID, we've added healthcare crisis, but we've also become more attuned to social crisis, George Floyd, Buffalo, the Texas school shooting. What is AmeriCorps role in social unrest, in social action crisis? Or is that not necessarily part of your purview?
SMITH: What I think is wonderful about AmeriCorps is we have the ability to pivot to respond on a dime to the challenges that are happening today. But we are also constant in consistent parts of the community every day.

When you think about social justice, I think AmeriCorps has a couple roles that we play. One, volunteering and service can take you from this pathway from charity to justice. It helps to build a muscle. That little kid whose mom takes him to the soup kitchen to serve might all of a sudden start thinking about: why is there hunger and homelessness in my community? How can I do more? And one day that little kid that started serving in the soup kitchen might run the soup kitchen or might run the advocacy organization that’s trying to get to the root cause.

That young man who says I want to be involved in public health in my community, so I’m going to go work at this public health institution might one day become the head of the policy center that is looking to change the game on health inequality in their community. And so it is a very important role to build that muscle at an early age and give people a sense of what the challenges are in their communities, so that they can both meet urgent immediate needs, but also get to root causes thinking about justice.

Also, we’re excited to see AmeriCorps members that are on the front lines thinking about: how can we respond today? How do we teach kids about inequality? How do we teach kids about the challenges of racism? How do we teach kids about gender equality? And those are the sorts of things that are happening right now. And it’s the demand that is coming from AmeriCorps members. They are telling us: we care about climate, we care about social justice. So they get to shape in partnership with the community how they’re going to serve. And so you’re going to see more social justice happening from AmeriCorps members.

SAFIAN: I was reflecting as you’re talking, we had a guest on the show a little while ago, Ken Frazier, the chairman of Merck, former CEO of Merck. And one of the things he talked about was with the move toward more remote offices that we’re losing this social fabric, that the workplace is a place where people who are different from each other are forced together and get to know each other and work together. It sounds a little bit like you see volunteering as another lever to keep the social lubricants and moving in the right way in our national culture.

SMITH: It’s hugely important. Bob Putnam, the scholar, wrote a book about 10 years ago, where he talked about this idea that community members are doing less of the things that brought us together to build social capital. I think about my mom who was a single mom, and she was the church secretary. She served right next to the corporate attorney; they were peers and they got to know each other. And that might not have happened. Things that happened at the rotary club, things that happened at the Boys and Girls Club and yes, things that happened through service, it allows us to break down the barriers that are driving us apart and allows us to see each other to get out of... I
won't name the social media platforms that cause us to be in these giant echo chambers and to, I think, rely on some of our worst instincts.

When I am with you, when I am meeting a need in my community, when I am rolling up my sleeves, I am getting my hands dirty; we have to see each other. And it is an important role that volunteering and service and AmeriCorps members play.

SAFIAN: So you led the Social Innovation Office inside the Obama White House. It can be hard to bring social impact ideas to scale. What are the levers that you think are most important in generating scaled impact out of your effort?

SMITH: Sure. So I led the Social Innovation Fund within the Obama administration. And the Social Innovation Fund was charged with doing two things. One, how do we prove and improve evidence based approaches in the social sector? The other thing that we were doing, we were helping to scale at the same time. And there were some unique things about that I think were very important. One, it was the public-private partnership that was huge. So we brought some government money; philanthropy then matched us. And then we had partners all across the country that were coming in once we proved, once we tested that innovation. Then we could be those first dollars in, and then the rest of the country, private sector, state and local government could help take us to the next level.

The other thing that we did is we were an operation that was helping to find the creative, the unique, the innovative that was happening across the country. And again, we could bring those to the market to think about scale.

SAFIAN: And to the people in this room, are there lessons that you would point to them, the priorities that they should have when they're trying to scale their impact?

SMITH: Well, I think one of the things that I think about first, when you think about scale, you have to get close. Bryan Stevenson from Equal Justice talks about getting proximate. You can't think about scaling if you don't know the product, if you don't know the people, if you don't have the experience alongside the challenges and the opportunities that you're trying to address. And so you got to step out. Sometimes I love remote work, but you've got to get into the community, you've got to get to know the people. And not only do you need to get into the community and get to know the people, but you have to make sure that the people closest to the pain are the people closest to the power, and you have to create room, diversify your board tables, diversify your staff leadership and make sure the people that you are trying to serve are driving the decisions, because that's the only way you are going to have your products.

SAFIAN: So what's at stake right now for AmeriCorps?
SMITH: It's interesting. What's at stake for AmeriCorps is what's at stake for America. Who are we as a people? How do we meet challenges? How do we meet a crisis? How do we meet each other? And what I saw during the pandemic, as I mentioned earlier, when the going got tough, AmeriCorps and America got tougher. And I think we saw the best in ourselves. And so right now, we have to ask, can we do that outside of a crisis? Do we have to wait for the world to be falling apart to be the best that we can possibly be? And I think what history shows us, whether it was after 9/11, whether it was after Hurricane Katrina, whether it was in the wake of World War II, whether it was during apartheid, Americans step up. And I think there is something about service that can help to catapult and accelerate that.

And so that's what's at stake for us right now. How can we be those force multipliers? How can we bring people together to see each other's humanity and making sure that we are doing everything, not just to think about ourselves, not just to look inward, but to look outward and make sure that we really believe in this idea that our neighbor's child is our child as well, and we are doing everything to invest in our community, not just our own house.

SAFIAN: And I guess not have to make it a crisis, not need a crisis to be able to accelerate and invest in that.

SMITH: Exactly. And I think what you're seeing, especially I think about the community that I grew up in, you often see the data that comes out that poor communities give more, poor communities give back more. I remember there was a politician once, and I won't mention a name, who said, "Kids in poor communities don't see people working." And I was flabbergasted. I said, these are the hardest working people I've ever seen, working three or four jobs, taking care of each other's kids, making sure that they're making a way.

And so I think we see these moments of crisis where people stand up and step up. But also, I think if you look closer, if you look at your own family, if you look at your own neighborhood, de Tocqueville called it something that was uniquely American. I'm not sure if it's uniquely American, but I see it all the time. I see the spirit of service. I get to travel across this country from close to close in rural neighborhoods and tribal neighborhoods and inner city communities, and I see people helping people and people giving back. So my job at AmeriCorps is to help to open those doors, help people to find a way that they can give back and make a difference in a way that they care about most.

SAFIAN: Well, if folks listening on the podcast or here in the room, want to get involved individually or as an organization, what do they do? Where do they go?

SMITH: So go to americorps.gov. Go to americorps.gov if you want to serve full time in a school, if you want to serve full time with our National Civilian Community Corps, which is actually what I want to do one day before I retire. You actually get on a van with 10 of
your peers. And this week you might be in Louisiana responding to Hurricane Ida; next week, you might be in Vermont, helping with a community garden that needs to be built; the week after that, you might be helping to respond to a disaster that's related to a fire; and you're cooking your own meals, and you're getting to know other people. So if you want to do that, you can do that.

Also, people often think that AmeriCorps is just for young folks. AmeriCorps members are 18 to 80. I've actually met some folks that are 90, that are AmeriCorps senior volunteers. Yes. We have over 100,000 AmeriCorps senior companions, foster grandparents, and retired senior volunteers. So there are ways that you can give back. If you want to work for City Year and Public Allies and Habitat for Humanity, you can do that as well. So go to americorps.gov. You can get an education stipend; you can get a living allowance; and you get the opportunity to change the world. Also, if you're interested in just doing something an hour here or there, you can go to americorps.gov and find ways for you to get involved in your community as well.

SAFIAN: Well, Michael, this has been great. I thank you. I hope everyone here at the Social Innovation Summit in D.C. has enjoyed it. Those of you listening, you can also always find us at mastersofscale.com. Michael, thank you so much.

SMITH: Thank you so much. This has been wonderful.