

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You are listening to Work In Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of Working Nation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

For 30 years, AmeriCorps has been providing opportunities for Americans of all backgrounds to serve their country, address the nation's most pressing challenges, including climate change, and improve lives in communities. In the process, the volunteer program has been helping its members gain both hard and soft skills preparing them for today's workforce. Joining me on the Work in Progress podcast is Michael D. Smith, CEO of AmeriCorps. Michael, thank you for joining me.

Michael D. Smith, AmeriCorps CEO:

Ramona, thank you for having me.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I love that we can talk about AmeriCorps and share with the audience who may not be familiar with it or may just have a vague idea of what it is. Why don't you give us the one-on-one on what AmeriCorps is all about?

Michael D. Smith, AmeriCorps CEO:

Well, you gave a great introduction. AmeriCorps, we just celebrated our 30th birthday. We will end our year-long celebration on September 12th, which will be the 30th anniversary of the first 20,000 AmeriCorps members being deployed across the country.

AmeriCorps for 30 years has operated on this simple belief that we may not have enough tax money to pay all the people to do all of the things that our communities need. But what we do have is this unique American ethos where people want to give back, they want to serve, and there's some that are willing to give sustained service for a year, for two years, working in our schools, working in our community centers, working at food pantries to make a real difference for communities who need us most.

Today, we have about 200,000 AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps senior volunteers that are serving in nearly 40,000 locations across the country. And chances are, if there is a challenge that communities are facing and there are people of goodwill doing something about it, AmeriCorps members are at the heart of it, and many of these communities have been at the heart of it for decades.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

My thought was maybe not enough people know about it, but it sounds like they do. You're getting a lot of people to help you out there.

Michael D. Smith, AmeriCorps CEO:

We need more and more every day. The demand, as you know, coming out of the pandemic for social services and for nonprofits is at an all time high. Even though we're in 40,000 communities across the country, we definitely can't meet the need. And so we are always calling out for Americans to raise their hands and serve.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

How do you connect those volunteers, those members of AmeriCorps, how do you connect them to what's needed in the community? How do you dig in and figure that out?

Michael D. Smith, AmeriCorps CEO:

The wonderful thing about AmeriCorps is it's not Michael Smith and my team figuring out from Washington D.C what's needed in Iowa or Montana or California. We have state commissions in each one of these states that gets to decide what the local needs are. Also, we have about six broad focus areas, but as I said, AmeriCorps members, if you have a passion, chances are we've got climate programs for you. We've got programs. We're in 10,000 schools. We've got 15,000 veterans that are serving. We've got almost 20,000 people that are serving in climate related fields. So chances are, if you have a passion, you want to be inside all day, we got something for you. You don't want to see a person and you want to be out on a trail in Montana or Alaska, we've got something for you.

Folks come to AmeriCorps.gov and we have a tool called FitFinder, and we help them to find a service experience that's good for them. Also, some people can serve full-time for a year. Some people might only be able to serve for a summer or might only be able to serve 20 hours a week. And so we have a wonderful diversity of experiences for people of all ages, 18 to 80 and beyond.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

When someone does sign up through AmeriCorps, what are the benefits for them? Is there an allowance? Is there some kind of stipend or any help? Because it's great that you're able to spend 20 or 30 hours a week maybe, but you also have to probably pay the rent.

Michael D. Smith, AmeriCorps CEO:

That is absolutely right. What I tell folks all the time is there is something that is wonderful and beautiful about service that is selfless, and we love all the selfless, passionate, compassionate people that want to serve, but there is something that's a little selfish as well. This isn't regular volunteers. We don't talk about AmeriCorps members being volunteers. We talk about them being members. In many cases, they're serving full-time jobs. Sometimes they're moving their whole lives. And so when you serve with AmeriCorps, you get a living allowance.

You're not going to get rich. We're going to give you enough so you can keep a roof over your head and you're going to keep food in your belly and pay your bills. You also get an Eli Segal Education Award, which is set to grow with Pell grants. So you get money for your education and you get student loan forbearance while you're serving.

You also get world-class training depending on the field that you're in. More and more AmeriCorps, we're marketing it as a year of service is going to help you accelerate on your career path. So you might walk away with certifications or credentialing. There are some programs, I was with a school in Massachusetts recently, where you can get your MSW while serving as AmeriCorps members in classrooms. So you get a variety of benefits that will help you to live while you serve, but maybe even more importantly will help to take you really, really far into your chosen career path.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One of the things that I mentioned at the beginning was the American Climate Corps. There has been this push to help train people high-demand skills for the clean energy economy. How are you participating in communities? What are people doing to help conserve our lands and waters?

Michael D. Smith, AmeriCorps CEO:

Conservation has been a part of AmeriCorps since the very beginning. Actually, one of the lackest voices in creating and helping to create this agency was the conservation field. There were these conservation corps, like the California Conservation Corps, that had existed for many years who said we actually need a dedicated pool of funding so we can help these young people keep a roof over their head and food in the belly while they serve. We need a network so that it isn't just in our state. And so they helped to create this agency, and from the very beginning, we've been helping to fuel environmental stewardship movement across the country.

A couple years ago you may remember there was a chance to have a Build Back Better Act. And unfortunately that legislation didn't make it through. If that legislation did pass, we would've had \$15 billion to start a once in a generation civilian climate corps. But since that bill didn't go through, President Biden said we've got to do it anyway. Young people were demanding it, they want it. We were hearing folks saying we need to turn this climate anxiety into climate action. We want to do something.

And so AmeriCorps, we got together under President Biden's leadership with six other federal agencies. We signed an MOU together, came up with a common set of agreements and principles, and said, you know what, let's get 20,000 American Climate Corps members in the field this coming year. And so now we've got 9,000 American Climate Corps members that are in the field right now. They are gaining skills while they're serving, and they are also being connected with resources to make sure that they can get the green energy and climate jobs of the future. And it is diverse.

You've got some people that are doing the traditional trail work that are the folks out in the woods like the original President Roosevelt, CCC. You've got some people that are doing solar panels in inner city communities or urban farming. You've got some folks that are working on climate education. You've got some people that are working on tribal land. We've come up with a lot of different options depending upon what your interests are, and we're just really excited.

What's really cool about it too is the demand is through the roof. Within six weeks of launching the American Climate Corps, 50,000 people signed up saying we want to be a part of this. We just launched something called Forest Corps with the US Forest Service. We had 80 slots and over 800 people signed up. So we believe that there is something that this generation wants to do here, and we're giving them an opportunity to take action now.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

They're learning great skills for the future and today. Are you connecting them or are the communities connecting them with potential employers?

Michael D. Smith, AmeriCorps CEO:

We are, and we've got a great track record of doing this. One of the programs that we looked at is something called FEMA Corps. After Hurricane Sandy, FEMA saw AmeriCorps members who were showing up to respond to disaster. They saw that they were quick, they were innovative. Some AmeriCorps members for the first time were using laptops to go into the field to help register people for FEMA benefits. FEMA hadn't done that before. And so FEMA came to us and said, "We need more of that. How do we get that? By the way, we also need a talent pipeline." And so FEMA 12 years ago actually started FEMA Corps where they get to deploy our AmeriCorps in CCC teams where they're needed most. They have their own designated teams.

They're also giving them federal emergency management training and trying to keep them in that pipeline. So over the past 12 years, FEMA has hired about 25% of our FEMA Corps AmeriCorps alum. In

the past two graduating classes, 70% of them got job offers. I was meeting with the head of FEMA recently, and her senior team is now a FEMA Corps alum. You can't walk in a hall without finding somebody that has served in FEMA Corps off the AmeriCorps program. And so we have intentionally found partners that know how to do this sort of skills training. Forest service, they're really excited about creating pathways into forest service. The parks are excited about bringing people in parks.

We've got a program in Baltimore, for instance, Civic Works, that has been around for many years that's doing more green work in urban areas. And we've got folks that are now working on electrical issues in Raven Stadium. We're intentionally partnering with organizations that aren't just going to do a year of service only, but are going to provide the kinds of training that's needed to keep people in these fields.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You mentioned earlier, and I think it's true, that there's a generation of people who want to make sure that we have clean air, clean water, it's energy efficient. One of the premises of a lot of our coverage is all jobs can be green jobs. It can be a plumber could be a green job, right? An HVAC person could be a green job. But it all comes down to trying to make sure that our resources are protected. So when you talk to the people who are members, what are they saying to you about the work that they're able to do?

Michael D. Smith, AmeriCorps CEO:

One of the reasons that I am sure that we are having the success that we're having so far on American Climate Corps is because it isn't just one thing. One of the kids that I think about, I shouldn't call him a kid, he's in his 20s now, but a young man by the name of Domingo from Green City Force in the Bronx, New York. He talked about him being a teenager and him not sure what he wanted to do. He said he had a neck tattoo. He didn't know who was going to hire him and he just didn't know where he was going. And he ran across a flyer for our Green City Forest AmeriCorps program that said they were going to be working on urban gardening. And he's like, "I don't really like the dirt, but let me go give this a try." Especially because it was in his community, he didn't have to leave.

Turns out he loved the dirt. Turns out he loved composting even more. And after his AmeriCorps service, he founded his own organization called Compost Power that now has contracts with the city and private sector organizations across the city of New York. And he's hiring AmeriCorps members to work for him and changing the face of what urban composting looks like.

The excitement that we're hearing is this isn't something that's far off. I don't have to move somewhere. It's not something that other people do, but it is something that affects my community and there's a way for me to do something about it. If I'm in Baltimore, if I'm in DC, if I'm in Denver, if I'm in San Francisco, if I'm on a reservation, there is work that I can do in this wonderful American Climate Corps where I can own the challenges and opportunities related to climate in my community.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Amongst some of the other things that you do, you also work with people on digital literacy. You also work with providing GED tutoring. How does that come about? Who are you working with and are you serving the members? Are you serving the community in those areas?

Michael D. Smith, AmeriCorps CEO:

AmeriCorps always has a triple bottom line. Number one, how do we have an impact for the community? What are the community issues that we're going to impact? Number two, how do we have

an impact on the members? We now have about 1.3 million AmeriCorps alum, 75% of whom end up staying somewhere in the social sector. So that year of service turns into a lifetime of social action. I think that's an incredible return on investment. And triple bottom line number three is the benefit to society. For instance, right now we're in 10,000 schools across the country serving thousands of students, especially coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic and helping with learning loss.

We have programs that are diverse based on the local community needs and building on the years of history where AmeriCorps and our grantees have been a part of those communities, understand the local challenges and concerns that are there, and are able to move pretty quickly in that space.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Michael, you have a new initiative around mental health, public health. Share those details with us.

Michael D. Smith, AmeriCorps CEO:

One of the things that we've done during the Biden/Harris administration is we're laser focused on your year of service turning into a pathway into a career. Two of the programs that lift that up the most beyond American Climate Corps are our Public Health AmeriCorps program with the Centers for Disease Control and our new Youth Mental Health Corps that we've launched with Pinterest and the Schultz Family Foundation.

In the case of Public Health AmeriCorps, CDC came to us and said, "We need 80,000 more folks that are working in public health fields, and we need them to be proximate and look like their communities. Can you help us with that?" And so today we have about 5,000 public health AmeriCorps members that are working in substance abuse, that are working on mental health issues, that are working on various navigation supports for communities, and they are getting world-class training from CDC and partners so that they end up staying in the public health field.

Actually, we launched the program in Milwaukee where I met a doctor who was running the program, and he said 10 years ago his family was pushing him into medical school. He wasn't sure he wanted to do it, so he decided to join an AmeriCorps VISTA program at a community health clinic. 10 years later, he's a doctor running our public health AmeriCorps program there in Milwaukee.

Then the Youth Mental Health Corps was really hearing from our partners saying we've got to do more in our schools to address what the Surgeon General has called one of our greatest challenges, this youth mental health crisis. So we've got three evidence-based areas that we're working on. We're piloting with 500 youth in this first year that are going to be working in schools, going to be getting training to help identify their peers who might be having issues, help connect them to support, and also do all sorts of peer social emotional learning to help them along the way. And Pinterest and the Schulz Family Foundation are providing added resources to raise our living allowances, to do evaluation, and to provide extra resources that those Youth Mental Health Corps members might need.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Between learning loss and the mental health issues, serving our children is a very, very, I'm sure, worthwhile purpose for the members that are part of AmeriCorps.

Michael D. Smith, AmeriCorps CEO:

That's absolutely right, which is probably why, over the 30 years, the P through 12 space has been our largest area of focus. I think the numbers that I most recently saw is we have about 50,000 AmeriCorps

members and AmeriCorps senior volunteers that are serving in our schools, providing tutoring, mentoring, coaching.

We actually launched a program after the pandemic with the White House and the Department of Education called the National Partnership for Student Success, where we're working to bring in 250,000 more supports to our schools to really help not only with learning loss, but to help with the teacher shortage that we've had, and a lot of the responsibilities that have been put on teachers that just don't have enough time in the day. So we're providing an extra set of hands. Our foster grandparents will say they're providing extra hugs and really helping to charge to the supports that our students need to succeed.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Volunteerism, a sense of purpose, helping your community, being a part of a community, obviously at the heart of AmeriCorps. What is your connection to this? What do you get out of this?

Michael D. Smith, AmeriCorps CEO:

I tell people all the time I have the greatest job in the federal government. The president may want to argue with me, but no one's waking me up at 3:00 in the morning to deal with a global crisis. But the reason I think I have the best job in the federal government is because every single day I get to see America at its very best. There are people that talk about the polarization, that talk about the division, that worry about will the next generation be apathetic, and there's not a day that I don't see people, regardless of ideology, regardless of political party, regardless of urban or rural or suburban, every day I see folks that are wanting to jump in, that are wanting to help their neighbor in remarkable ways, whether that is after a disaster, whether it's helping someone read, whether it's helping an elder not get scammed by something using some new technology. So that is wonderful for me.

For me, personally, I grew up in a single parent household. Both of my parents were 16 years old when I was born. We were poor. We didn't have a whole lot of money. And the only reason I am able to stand here talking to you today is because of folks like our AmeriCorps members. My mom sent me to my local Boy/Girls Club that had foster grandparents, which is now part of AmeriCorps, that had VISTA members that are now a part of AmeriCorps, that had youth development professionals who weren't looking to get rich, weren't looking to get famous, but believed in this idea that our neighbors' children are all of our children and help to make sure my dreams, my family's dreams are possible.

I come to work every day figuring out how can I support those people, those folks that help to hold communities together, and help families who may just be holding on by the edge have a little extra boost, a little extra support to encourage them along their journey.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

It does sound like you have a better job than the president's.

Michael D. Smith, AmeriCorps CEO:

His benefits are better.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Sounds like you get a lot out of it too.

Michael D. Smith, AmeriCorps CEO:

Work in Progress Episode 333: Michael D. Smith, AmeriCorps CEO

I do. I do. I do.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Michael, thank you so much for talking with me for the Work in Progress podcast.

Michael D. Smith, AmeriCorps CEO:

Thank you so much. I appreciate you lifting up the work.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Michael D. Smith, CEO of AmeriCorps. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of Working Nation. Thank you for listening.