

**Michael D. Smith**

Chief Executive Officer, AmeriCorps  
Keynote Speech

Thank you for joining AmeriCorps today at the Office of Research and Evaluation Convening called “the Dialogue.” I am grateful to be with you virtually and look forward to speaking with you all today and in the months ahead.

This week’s convening gives us an opportunity to reflect on AmeriCorps priority issues, including the ways diverse communities like refugees, youth of color, older Americans, and rural and urban populations are engaged in national service and volunteerism.

As you know, our research and evaluation findings allow us to innovate and improve national service programs in order to increase civic engagement and program success across the nation.

And that innovation has already started. An AmeriCorps member, Fatemeh, joined the AmeriCorps VISTA Summer Associate program at the Refugee Welcome Center in Albany, New York, after the same location offered her family support during their resettlement from Afghanistan in 2019.

- The Refugee Welcome Center project had three important goals: resettle refugees to become members of the community; spark social cohesion to connect resettled families to their new neighborhoods; and better understand the specific needs of newly arriving refugee families.
- This project is just one example of the many ways AmeriCorps members use their time and skills to aid refugee and immigrant communities.

AmeriCorps serves communities – particularly underserved communities – and unites members and volunteers of diverse backgrounds to build new skills, achieve common goals, and develop new experiences.

The AmeriCorps mission is rooted in unity. We embrace diversity and civic engagement. We expand, innovate and improve national service and get more involved in serving our communities and country. And we ensure civic engagement and national service opportunities are available to all, regardless of zip code.

But before I go on, I want to share a bit of **my** story.

I was born to teen parents in a poor black neighborhood in Springfield, Massachusetts. We did not have a whole lot of money, but what we did have was love in excess and a village that nurtured and guided me from day one.

It was at my Boys & Girls Club that I first met AmeriCorps members, along with all kinds of volunteers. They took us camping, taught us about Black pride, social justice, and gave us the opportunity to serve and care for our community when we were still little kids. Not only was this the childcare my mom needed for me, but it was an important exposure to education rooted in national service.



These early opportunities made a lasting impression and I've been blessed to build a career focused on giving back to underdog kids and communities like mine, where systemic inequality denies liberty and possibility for far too many.

And that's at the heart of our conversation today...

AmeriCorps has a strong belief in the importance of scholarly research to conduct credible and meaningful studies on national service, volunteering, civic engagement, and social capital. We're dedicated to foundational research investments that explore the most current trends of civic engagement and volunteering and fund cutting-edge methodologies such as participatory research where researchers and communities collaborate equally in identifying local issues and community-based solutions.

Research on civic engagement, volunteering, and how every day citizens can solve local issues in their communities

- increases the nation's understanding and knowledge about the importance and potential of strengthening civic infrastructure and increasing civic engagement in America.
- and allows the agency to invest its resources more strategically.

Increasing University and community partnerships enables AmeriCorps'

- An opportunity to bring in institutions of higher education as research partners
- Measures national service impacts
- Make inroads into local and diverse community or place-based organizations
- And inspires innovation and improvement of our national service programs.

National service is about local solutions to local problems, and through our unique structure, we're able to both incubate innovative solutions to some of the nation's most urgent challenges, while also investing in solutions with proven results.

At a moment in time when many Americans seek something to bring them together, it's essential that we're able to demonstrate that volunteering and national service is a way to do just that.

America's volunteer rate remains remarkably consistent, as does its rate of "informal volunteering" – meaning things like "helping a neighbor."

And during Older Americans Month, it's worth noting that older adults who serve in AmeriCorps Seniors programs not only provide benefits to their communities, but they also benefit from their service.

- In a 2019 longitudinal study, AmeriCorps Seniors found that 84% of volunteers reported improved or stable health during a time in life when one might expect to see a decline.



Coincidentally, May is also Mental Health Awareness Month and in addition to health benefits, 88% of volunteers reported a decrease in feelings of isolation and 78% felt less depressed after volunteering.

We often talk about AmeriCorps as having a triple-bottom-line: it's good for the organization, it's good for the members, and it's good for the community. That's what we mean when we say AmeriCorps is a force multiplier.

That same philosophy can be applied when thinking about evidence building through research – it's more than the fact that our programs work, it's that AmeriCorps works at every level and is continuing to use evidence to adapt and improve.

AmeriCorps works for organizations, for members, for communities, and for our country.

The agency's use of data and evidence helped increase the impact of national service grants in more than 40,000 communities. Our mission is to ensure our work and investments are as effective and efficient as possible.

We also have evidence that AmeriCorps can be a life-changing experience for those who serve by building new skills and helping with workforce development by opening doors to further education and diverse career paths.

- Nearly all of our Return-on-Investment studies have shown that AmeriCorps members have increased employment, earnings, and educational attainment after their period of national service.

We know through our research of national service alumni, AmeriCorps creates citizens that are more engaged in their community and more likely to vote, creating new generations of civic leaders for our nation.

And, our AmeriCorps' investments directed at gaining greater knowledge or understanding of national service and applied into actionable information, helps spur innovative thinking and renews our leadership in the field as America's volunteering and national service agency.

This is where all of you come in and why many of you are here today. Stakeholder engagement is a fundamental piece to building evidence and our development process. Our agency is innovative and collaborative.

And we must continually integrate the valuable lessons learned in our research and evidence throughout our work, our goals, and our partnerships.

During my first several months in this role, I've had the joy of listening, attending meetings, and talking with our stakeholders, AmeriCorps members, members of Congress and more.

I am still learning and listening as CEO, but there are three themes for how I plan to prioritize my time as a leader of this agency, thanks to what I've heard from so many.

First, ensuring Americans see the critical importance and impact of national service to our democracy.



It's important that in this moment AmeriCorps is not just seen as a thousand flowers blooming, but we are able to show, because of AmeriCorps, this is how the country changed.

This is how the country came together. This is how we continue to promote education and tackle health disparities.

I want to make sure we focus on the impact of AmeriCorps, so when we look back 20 years from now, we can all say this is the moment that AmeriCorps came together and made a difference.

With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, AmeriCorps remains at the ready with people on the ground in communities nationwide. In many places, we were already trusted partners and were able to pivot quickly and start responding to needs. To name a few examples:

- We established mutual aid networks, supported vaccination efforts, and provided food and resources to those in need, including folks that had lost their jobs so we could help make sure that they can continue to make ends meet.
- We're also continuing our work in schools to make sure young people have access to online classes and the support they need.
- My priority is making sure that when people think of AmeriCorps, they think about its impact.

Second, we need to make sure AmeriCorps and national service reflect the diversity of our country and the communities we serve.

While working side-by-side with local leaders, AmeriCorps should reflect the people from the communities in which we serve.

I am passionate about addressing barriers to volunteerism and service and making sure service is accessible to everyone.

Now is the time to eradicate the barriers that can make national service seem like a luxury or privilege.

We need to make sure every American who wants to serve, is serving, or being served, sees themselves as a part of our national service family and is inspired and enabled to serve their communities or across the country.

And, that the organizations we fund are all shapes and sizes and have diverse, homegrown leadership at the helm.

I look forward to finding ways that we can support your efforts – and efforts by grantees across the country – to make service more accessible, to reduce barriers, and to make sure everyone who wants to serve CAN serve.

Finally, I think we have an opportunity right now where AmeriCorps can play a meaningful role in bringing people together during one of the most difficult times in our nation's history.



Finally, I see uniting Americans in service as my third main priority.

I've seen people from completely different backgrounds, who you would never expect to meet, let alone work together, serve together and build meaningful relationships.

I truly believe that a shared commitment to service can break down the greatest barriers.

I have experienced the impact of AmeriCorps firsthand throughout my life, and I know that every day, AmeriCorps members, AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers, and staff work relentlessly to help communities recover and thrive.

As you join these thoughtful discussions, let's focus on how we can come together and move this agency forward. How we can integrate evidence to bring people from completely different backgrounds, identities and cultures together to build meaningful relationships. Let's continue to make an impact in this country.

On behalf of President Biden, thank you for being a part of the AmeriCorps family.