



A PODCAST WITH RUSTY STAHL | S4 BONUS

## Dr. King, AmeriCorps, & Nonprofit Work

WITH  
Michael Smith  
AmeriCorps



INTRO [00:00:03] You're listening to the Fund The People Podcast, I'm your host Rusty Stahl. On this show we serve up a healthy nutritious alternative to the nonprofit starvation cycle. If you work as a funder, a non-profit, or intermediary, we'll help you invest in America's nonprofit workforce to drive equity, effectiveness and endurance in our nonprofit and social justice community. So let's get going.

RUSTY: [00:00:47]

Welcome to a special bonus episode of the Fund The People Podcast from the Martin Luther King Jr. National Day of Service. In this episode, you'll learn about the partnership between our government and the nonprofit sector in advancing public service, civic engagement, equity and social justice. And you'll learn about how AmeriCorps, the Federal agency formerly known as the Corporation for National and Community Service, contributes toward governmental investments in the nonprofit workforce.

I'm really thrilled and honored to have with us today Michael Smith, the eighth CEO of AmeriCorps, the Federal agency for service and volunteering. Michael Smith was nominated by President Biden and confirmed by the United States Senate in 2021. He has dedicated his career to social justice and public service in support of underserved children and families. Prior to leading AmeriCorps, CEO Smith served as Executive Director of the My Brother's Keeper Alliance and Director of Youth Opportunity Programs at the Obama Foundation. During President Obama's Administration, he served in the White House as special assistant to the President and Senior Director of Cabinet Affairs overseeing the My Brother's Keeper initiative and serving as Director of the Social Innovation Fund, which was housed at AmeriCorps. Michael Smith also served as the Senior Vice President of Social Innovation at the Case Foundation, created by the Case family, which founded AOL. And that was the role he was in when I had the good fortune to meet him back in the early 2000s. I'm thrilled for his leadership

of our country and I'm thrilled to have him join us now on the show. Happy Martin Luther King Day and welcome to the podcast, Michael Smith.

MICHAEL: [00:02:37]

Thanks for having me Rusty, good to see you!

RUSTY: [00:02:38]

You too. It's wonderful to have you here on the show and since this is the first time we've actually spoken since you were nominated by the president and confirmed as CEO of AmeriCorps by Congress, I'd like to offer my own personal congratulations to you.

MICHAEL: Thank you.

RUSTY: I know it's a little delayed... So I wanted to start off by asking you to briefly share with me and our listeners a few of the key influences that motivated and continue to animate your public service and philanthropic career.

MICHAEL: [00:03:09]

Rusty, thanks again for asking me to be here. You know, when I think about the North Star in my career, it goes back to the fact that I was a kid from Springfield, Massachusetts. My parents were both 16-years-old when I was born. I grew up during the crack epidemic of the 80s and 90s where, you know, communities saw an increase of violence, where we also saw working class communities lose because of manufacturing going away and poverty drifted in in different ways. And when I think about how a kid from Springfield, Massachusetts, born to teen parents, you know, with all the odds stacked against him, how I could go, as you said, being nominated now by two presidents to serve for the American people, it's because of the nonprofit sector. It's because of folks like AmeriCorps members, folks like you.

My mom sent me to my Boys and Girls Club when I was very young. She said she did it for cheap daycare but what she got, what she got is this whole other village for her kid, people that would lift me up and people that would put me in my place when I needed to be put in my place and helped me to dream dreams bigger than I had for myself. So I have always tried to build a career that was about giving back to kids and underdog communities, like the ones that I grew up in, building capacity and making hope and possibility the norm and not just something that you have to gamble for.

RUSTY: [00:04:28]

Yeah, thank you for that. That's powerful and ties directly into a conversation about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as well. So, before we get to that, though, I'm a proud AmeriCorps alum so I brought my old school sweatshirt jacket, part of the uniform with the old logo. People listening on the podcast can't see, but I'm showing it on camera to Michael and he's got his more modern AmeriCorps logo up on his screen.

MICHAEL: [00:04:58]

So this is the new AmeriCorps logo. You might be able to get something for that one out of eBay Rusty. That's a collector's item.

RUSTY: [00:05:04]

Well, hopefully I'm not a collector's item at this point, but shoutout to George Washington University where I did my Learn and Serve AmeriCorps term. I think a lot of people are familiar with AmeriCorps, folks who work in nonprofits and philanthropy, but for those who may not be fully informed, can you provide us with, you know, a basic introduction to the institution and its programs?

MICHAEL: [00:05:27]

I would love to. AmeriCorps is the Federal agency for volunteering and service. We work to improve lives and strengthen communities through the power of civic engagement and volunteering. We were founded about, actually 30 years ago, we were founded in 1993 under President Bill Clinton and the idea at that time was, 'How do we tap into this unique American energy of people wanting to give back to their communities?' But there's something that's in between the episodic volunteer that might show up once a month or show up when a disaster happens or someone that is a full-time worker at a nonprofit organization or in the government. How do we create this core mentality where folks might give a year of their life, two years of their life, to be that bridge over troubled waters and provide a lot of important services on issues that matter most?

And so fast forward, 30 years later, we now have more than 200,000 AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers serving in 40,000 locations in every state across this country and the U.S. territories. And they are doing all sorts of different things along with more than 1.2 million alumni that we find continue to serve their country long after their AmeriCorps service. Folks like you, Rusty.

And so we operate through four major programs. We have our AmeriCorps State and National program, where we invest in some of the organizations that are really well known—Public Allies, City Year, Teach for America—where folks give a year or two of service and they get a stipend and they get an education award and other wraparound benefits to make their service possible—and it's often full-time service that they're giving to their community—and we give those grants directly to multi-state organizations, or sometimes in partnership with our state commissions. Every state has a governor-appointed state commission, so that those grants are really bubbling up from the local level figuring out what the local needs are.

We also had our AmeriCorps Seniors program, which a lot of people don't think about, but we have more than 100,000 AmeriCorps seniors over 55 years old that are giving back through foster grandparents, our senior companions program and our retired senior volunteer program.

We have AmeriCorps NCCC, which is the National Civilian Community Corps, which actually has its roots in President Roosevelt CCC. It's a residential leadership training program where we train up mostly 18- to 24-year-olds. We then give them keys to a 15-passenger van and we

send them on assignments to respond to floods and hurricanes or during the pandemic running testing and vaccination lines. Real urgent, disaster-related needs.

And we have AmeriCorps VISTA, which is one of our oldest programs, which started during the Johnson Administration. This is Volunteers In Service To America, and it's a poverty-related program where AmeriCorps members go in and help nonprofits that are working on poverty to build capacity. So they might not be doing direct service, they might be writing a strategic plan, they might be doing fundraising, they might be helping to implement a new program.

And so you can see, we're quite diverse and across the country AmeriCorps members could be working in schools, they could be working in climate, they could be working on violence prevention, really diverse needs for the diverse challenges and opportunities that our communities are facing.

RUSTY: [00:08:44]

It's incredible. And it's incredible how all these different administrations over the years and their public service agendas and programs have rolled into AmeriCorps and the agency called AmeriCorps now, it used to be called the Corporation for National and Community Service and people may remember that, but it has been rebranded as AmeriCorps, so thank you for that. It's pretty impressive and incredible and it reminded me that my father actually served as a VISTA...

MICHAEL: How about that!?

RUSTY: Yeah, when he was a younger man doing kind of community organizing work in the neighborhood we lived in. So it's incredible that the government has supported that kind of work over the years and it goes on.

MICHAEL: [00:09:25]

Yeah it's an extraordinary legacy. We sometimes could have three or four generations that have served in some capacity or other. And if you add in our friends over at the Peace Corps, sometimes you get even more, which is really exciting to see.

RUSTY: [00:09:36]

That makes sense. Yep. So this month we're celebrating Martin Luther King Jr. Day, the holiday and the National Day of Service, and wanted to speak with you about the role that AmeriCorps plays in this important holiday. And so, could you share a little bit about the connection between AmeriCorps and King Day?

MICHAEL: [00:09:57]

Well, Congress designated Martin Luther King Day as the only Federal holiday that is also a National Day of Service. And when they did that, they made sure that there was going to be a Federal agency that was responsible for leading that call to action, and that Federal agency is AmeriCorps. So many months ago, every year, we start calling out to nonprofit organizations:

Do you need resources? What are your plans? What are you going to do to help MLK Day be a 'day on' not a 'day off' has been the tagline for so many years.

We work closely with the King Center and we try to provide hundreds of volunteer opportunities across the country and encourage Americans to think about Dr. King's Legacy. If you want to build your beloved community do you go shopping on MLK day? Do you sit home and watch more Netflix on MLK day? Or do you go out and serve just like Dr. King did and not only serve on that day but think about how you're going to create a life of service and we hope that not only are millions of Americans serving on MLK day working in partnership with us, but we hope that it also creates that spark where they create a plan for how they're going to serve all year round.

RUSTY: [00:11:07]

That's fantastic. And I noticed on the website, there's a search engine where people can find volunteer and service opportunities for that day or beyond in their zip code. I did some searching on there and I found an opportunity to box up contributed food and other things at the Hudson Valley Food Bank, for example, which is in my area. So, that's a great resource. People can go to [AmeriCorps.gov](https://www.americorps.gov) and find that. I noticed AmeriCorps had made fairly sizable grants to set off nonprofits both for King day and then the September 11th day of service. Obviously, those grants are completed for this cycle, but I didn't realize that that was a component of this. Could you just share a little bit about that?

MICHAEL: [00:11:51]

Yeah, we know, it takes people to run projects, you got to get the supplies together, you got to get the place where you're going to put these projects together, you got to advertise and you reach out and so we're proud to provide millions of dollars in grants both for MLK Day of Service and 9/11 Day of Service. Any nonprofit can apply. So look to [AmeriCorps.gov](https://www.americorps.gov) for those deadlines. And as you said, you can go to [AmeriCorps.gov](https://www.americorps.gov) and find a way to serve, but you can also go to [AmeriCorps.gov](https://www.americorps.gov) and post your project if you have service projects that you're running where you would like to bring people in to serve with you.

RUSTY: [00:12:22]

Fantastic. So beyond just getting AmeriCorps members placed at your nonprofit or that kind of thing, there are these other important resources that AmeriCorps can provide. So, kind of looping back to what you talked about poverty and opportunity for young people and others in communities, what would be your call to action for Americans and nonprofit leaders for MLK Day this year? And obviously it's a little too late to plan for this year to be fully involved if you haven't. But for future years, as we live through these crucial times for our democracy, for racial equity, for social justice.

MICHAEL: [00:12:59]

There are two Dr. King quotes that I think of when I think about MLK day. One is "Anybody can be great, because anybody can serve" and this was something that was part and parcel to who he was and then there's that other great quote that we've all heard "service is the rent you pay for living." And I think when you reflect on those words you have to ask yourself "What am I

doing for others? What am I doing to leave this world better than I left it? What am I doing to honor the legacy of people that came before me?" And, you know, I think if we want to nerd out, we can talk about de Tocqueville who came and he saw hundreds of years ago this unique American value of people giving back. And I know I saw this in my own life, people who do not have a whole lot of money, not a whole lot of resources that gave their last. You know, my grandmother used to have a pot that was open for anybody who came over for Sunday dinner, and she worked in factory jobs her whole life.

And so, this idea that we give to others, this idea that our neighbor's child is our child. So, on MLK day, I really encourage individuals to challenge themselves to think, what am I doing to be of service to others? Not only on MLK day but all year through. And when I think about the nonprofit sector, I think of this path from charity to justice. Charity is important, right? And there are nonprofits that we work with that have to do the hard work of meeting urgent, "here and now" needs: right now it is cold in many places across this country, people need shelter, people are hungry and people need food, young people who are dealing with violence need someone right now that can interrupt that violence. But we also need people that are thinking about root causes: Why are we in this situation in the first place? Why do we keep talking about these issues year in and year out? Why do we never seem to get to a solution?

And so I believe, and what I've seen in my background, is starting with charity. You know that young mom that brings her daughter to the soup kitchen who is serving those in need, one day she might end up running that shelter, one day she might decide she wants to become a policy maker, to think about bills for hunger and homelessness. And we see, for instance, AmeriCorps members that serve in education fields, who 10, 15, 20 years later are not only educators and administrators but then are sometimes secretaries of education or leading advocacy organizations that are working on policies related to education. The same is certainly true for climate.

And so when I think about nonprofits that are doing this work, I certainly think about MLK Day as an opportunity to bring people in to serve, but also think about how are you creating that pathway from charity to justice? So you're creating that spark but also building up folks that will serve for the rest of their lives and also become justice makers to make sure that we're beginning to put a real impact in these issues that our communities are facing.

RUSTY: [00:15:49]

I really appreciate that, speaking to charity and justice because it's too easy to quote Dr. King in narrow terms about a life of service and not talk about his politics and his justice work, which really is what he was doing, fighting for civil rights and poor people's rights and Black people's rights. And so we can't ignore that as we talk about engaging in public service and charity. So thank you for that balanced call to action.

So, stepping back from the King holiday while you're here, I wanted to talk to you a little bit more about where AmeriCorps is and how people engage as AmeriCorps members. So, to continue

the conversation about equity and justice, what do you see as the role of AmeriCorps now in the overall equity agenda of the Biden-Harris Administration?

MICHAEL: [00:16:42]

I am so proud to serve the Biden-Harris Administration who started on day one thinking about 'What does equity mean?' and it certainly means more than, you know, reading speeches during Black History Month or Hispanic Heritage Month or Native American History Month. Equity means getting to root causes. It means understanding what are those policies? What are those man-made procedures that deny hope and opportunity and possibility and liberty for so many Americans? And so the Biden-Harris Administration called on every single Federal agency to create an equity plan. And I was so excited to see that when I came into this agency I wasn't starting from scratch. Actually during the previous administration, members of this team after George Floyd was killed, members of the agency came together and said, "We need to do better. We need to do more," and begin to create some groups that were thinking about this, thinking about educating themselves, thinking about the way that this showed up in AmeriCorps policies. And you know, what is so interesting to me about that is oftentimes agencies, whether they're in the government or nonprofit organizations that are doing good, sometimes don't think that that conversation has anything to do with them. We're doing the most good, we're doing everything, we've got equity down pat. But we live in this society that deals with these issues that are hundreds of years in the making and so all of us have to look in the mirror and see what could we be doing better to create a more equitable society.

And so just last year we released our first ever Equity and Action Plan. It's rooted in a few different principles. One that I am most excited about is how do you make sure AmeriCorps reflects the rich diversity of the nation and the communities that we serve. I'm proud to say we're doing better than many people have thought, we're actually more diverse ethnically than the nation we're about 23% African American. If you drill in deep to some states, like California, where 45% are Hispanic or Latinx, we're doing a little bit better. But we realize we could do even more. And to do even more that's going to make us think about, 'What are the barriers to service?' I remember being at a national conference for volunteering and service some years ago where a young woman of color who was an AmeriCorps alum was asked, 'Why don't you see more of your friends doing this?' And she said, 'You know, many of my friends see this as a luxury that they can't afford.' This idea that your family doesn't have a whole lot of resources and then you're going to take a year off before college or after college, you're going to make almost no money, you're not clear where that's going to bring you.

And we've really had to pause and think about what are those barriers. We don't want AmeriCorps to be this luxurious program for the affluent and I'm proud to say that it's not. But for instance, I came in and the living allowance for many of our AmeriCorps members was \$10 an hour, so if a local organization wasn't able to go out and raise a lot more money, you were getting less than \$10 an hour to serve full-time, more than 1,700 hours a year in a place like New York and you've got to provide your own housing and you've got to provide your own food and you've got to get yourself to and from your assignment. And so we're thinking a lot about the living allowance and President Biden just this past Fall came out during the White House

United We Stand Summit and said, 'Congress, we need you to raise the living allowance for AmeriCorps members to \$15 an hour by 2025.' And so we're going to get that done.

But we also think about housing, we think about transportation, we think about job training and all of those wraparound benefits, that we found that AmeriCorps members desperately need to do their service, but also makes it so appealing. We found that AmeriCorps members are more likely to get a job more quickly than their peers, that they find jobs through their network, that they find training that they need during their AmeriCorps experience. And so we want to build those in. So it's not only about the members though, and reducing those barriers it's also about our grantees. Federal grants can be hard to process and we've got old, outdated systems and we've heard from people who said, 'I just can't do this, this is so difficult, all of the paperwork.' And so, we're thinking about how can we be responsible stewards of the taxpayer dollar but also make sure that we're making this process as simple as possible.

So, we're thinking about equity for recruitment and retention for our members, but we're also thinking about it for our grantees. We think a lot about our tribal communities, and our Federal Trust responsibility to them and making sure that that is an easier relationship. We think about addressing limited English proficiency and what are the language materials that we have? What are the resources and helps that we have for folks where English isn't their first language? And we also think about equity in our procurement process. Do we have diverse vendors in the dollars that we're spending? And so we've got a plan where we're not just talking about this. We're being about it. And I was also proud to hire our first-ever diversity equity and inclusion officer for the agency who is now leading this plan to make sure that we implement.

RUSTY: [00:21:41]

Fantastic. Thank you and I'm thrilled to hear all of that. You know, I was interested in talking with you about... There's looking at this AmeriCorps experience from the individual AmeriCorps member perspective, there's looking at it from your perspective overall, and then there's looking at it from a perspective of those nonprofits that are sort of utilizing or engaging AmeriCorps members whether they are the grantees of AmeriCorps or some grantee is placing an AmeriCorps member with them, and thinking about AmeriCorps members as a part of this workforce. Yes, they are not on salary, they're living on an allowance or a stipend, as you said, but they are providing that people power, in a sense adding to the staff capacity of the organization's where they work. So I wondered if you could talk a little bit about that, what do you think about AmeriCorps members as sort of part of this workforce for the public good, and you've already touched on, you know, how would you like to improve those benefits for AmeriCorps members, so there's the living stipend, there's the Ed. award as well. I'm just curious to hear, you know, any more thoughts about that?

MICHAEL: [00:22:56]

Sure, Rusty. So, you know, we've got hundreds of thousands of AmeriCorps members that are serving alongside nonprofits everyday. People ask me, "What happened to AmeriCorps during Covid?" and the answer is AmeriCorps never went away. AmeriCorps was serving alongside nonprofit organizations. I was just meeting with an executive director of a Boys and Girls Club

who, within less than a month of all the closures, realized that they had to reopen because their parents had to go to work and their children were going to be sitting at home. Not only parents who are first responders, but parents in low-income communities who had to choose between work and eating. And so we had nonprofits all across the country that were creating distance learning pods and AmeriCorps members were right there. You know, when teachers had to figure out this virtual learning thing, AmeriCorps members like City Year and Teach for America and Reading Partners, they all went virtual too and helped teachers figure out this really tricky new terrain. When hospitals had to figure out how are we going to deal with this overwhelming surge of illness or doing these testing and vaccinations, AmeriCorps members stood up and worked alongside them, running those testing and vaccination lines and even serving in many functions in public health. When communities in these past couple summers were dealing with surges of violence, AmeriCorps members served as violence interrupters and credible messengers. So AmeriCorps members are part and parcel of the nonprofit community and have been for 30 plus years.

And when I think about the conversations that I've had with nonprofit leaders, they'll tell me a few things. One: AmeriCorps is a force multiplier. So everyone likes to talk about how great and wonderful volunteers are, but if no one's managing volunteers, it just doesn't work. Someone's got to screen volunteers, interview volunteers, train volunteers, make sure the volunteers are getting in their necessary hours and are doing the right thing. Someone there has to provide them feedback, and AmeriCorps members often can play that role of managing others. So while we have 200,000 AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Senior volunteers, they are managing hundreds of thousands, if not millions, more of episodic volunteers that are doing that work.

The other thing that we hear from nonprofit leaders is they provide surge capacity. That project that we just didn't get done otherwise, this new city grant that came in that we have to figure out how to implement, this new challenge that arose in their community. AmeriCorps members are the ones that are often putting those things together.

We also hear from nonprofit leaders that AmeriCorps provides wraparound benefits that they couldn't do on their own, right? So we provide that living allowance, we provide that education award, we provide loan deferment and forbearance, but we also provide things like professional development and a network. You know, those things that you see that are so easy in corporate America but are so hard to come by in the nonprofit sector.

And so we provide that but the other thing that I love about AmeriCorps is it becomes a career pathway. And so it is a win-win. I cannot tell you the number of AmeriCorps members that I met, who started working at a community development corporation or started working in the school as an AmeriCorps member and are now full time employees of that nonprofit organization. So that is really important and nonprofit leaders love it, because AmeriCorps members have a servant's heart. They work hard, they work long hours, they want to get it right and they get that training that they needed through service that puts them a couple steps ahead of folks that might just be coming in off the street.

RUSTY: [00:26:26]

Heart of service, that's for sure. So I'm curious, so the President has called on Congress to up the stipend to \$15 an hour by 2025 you said. That seems important and like a basic thing that needs to happen. I know it's not minimum wage everywhere but it is in some places and seems to be the standard that a lot of unions and others are moving toward. How do we get that done? How do we get that through Congress in the next 2 years? And what can the nonprofit sector do to help make that happen?

MICHAEL: [00:27:03]

AmeriCorps has a long proud bipartisan tradition and when, the previous leader of the previous administration is the only President in the history of our country who didn't support this agency, when we didn't have that support, it was bipartisan members of Congress who made sure the agency, not only survived, but actually grew during those difficult years.

And so, we're going to continue believing in the strong bipartisan support that we have in Congress, because members of Congress, from red states, from blue states, see the power of AmeriCorps members making a difference at times of great challenge. And so we're going to depend on that bipartisan support to get that done. But if for whatever reason that doesn't happen, we've made a commitment that we're going to do this anyway. President Biden made sure that AmeriCorps received, thanks to also bipartisan support from Congress, made sure that we received an extra billion dollars during the beginning of the Administration. And we've taken that money to provide all sorts of resources within the agency. But one thing we've done is we've been able to raise the living allowance incrementally and so it's been growing year over year during the Biden-Harris Administration. But we've made a commitment that come hell or high water, we're going to get to \$15 an hour even if that means fewer slots for AmeriCorps members, because I'd rather have AmeriCorps members that can eat, that can have a roof over their head, not have to worry about how ends are going to be met. I'd rather have fewer of them than to have AmeriCorps members that are struggling. So we're going to get that done, but we're working closely with the White House, closely with Congress to make sure that President Biden's call to action will be realized.

RUSTY: [00:28:40]

Fantastic. Well, we'll have you back on the show in 2025 to celebrate that moment, but that's fantastic to hear that you're incrementally raising the floor, that seems like a very strategic way to go about it. So it's not any kind of shock to the system.

MICHAEL: [00:28:57]

Yeah, we're incrementally raising the floor, but we're also applauding nonprofit organizations across the country that are doing it before us. And there are plenty, there are organizations, I believe FoodCorps CEO just issued a public statement saying why they had to get to \$15 an hour before we did, PowerCorps PHL. There are many, I don't want to get into all of the names, but there are many that have figured out a way to raise philanthropic and private sector dollars to get to beyond what the government minimum is. But that's also a challenge, right? So what that will mean is nonprofits and philanthropically enriched environments will be able to do that

where nonprofits—where the greatest challenges are and the most low-income communities might struggle with that. So we have to come in, make sure that we raise the Federal minimum, but also, you know, for members of the philanthropic community that are listening, we need them to go into these low-income communities and help these nonprofits think about the living allowance, raising the living allowance but also thinking about wraparound benefits. There are nonprofits across the country that are AmeriCorps grantees, that provide housing stipends, or provide housing, some that provide food, some that provide transportation benefits. So, the government is going to get you far, but we hope, and we were actually set up as a government corporation in 1993 so that we could do these sorts of public-private partnerships. So that philanthropy and the private sector could help meet these urgent needs for our AmeriCorps members cross-country.

RUSTY: [00:30:21]

It's always a challenging dance between philanthropic and government resources and when should philanthropy step in where government falls short, but it sounds like that partnership is in play and perhaps AmeriCorps can help set the standard for nonprofits and what they think about paying so, for example, interns who aren't AmeriCorps but also deserve at least, you know, 15 an hour.

MICHAEL: [00:30:47]

Yes! Pay our interns, we've gotta pay our interns and I am proud to work for the Biden Administration because for the first time in history, the White House is paying its interns and they're actually making more than \$20 an hour and so. Look, I was an intern, I was a Capitol Hill intern. I actually was able to get paid because I had a mentor from a different community, a mentor of means who said to me when you write your Congressman tell him you don't have any money and if you're going to come to DC, you're going to need to be paid. I would have never thought of being able to do that and I was able to get at that time a tiny, little minimum wage, but it made all the difference for me.

And so, if folks are doing the work, they need to be paid for that work, that that's getting done. And we have to think about the equity situation that, you know, for so many kids, their parents can pay their rent, they can pay their way, they can pay their food. But I remember when I was working at the White House, interns had to go and work a second job. They were working then long hard hours and then they had to go and wait tables or do whatever they had to do so that they can pay their exorbitant rent in Washington, DC. We need to make sure our people that are working, our people are serving, have the resources they need to get the job done.

RUSTY:: [00:31:56]

Absolutely, absolutely. We're going to try to get **Pay Our Interns**, the organization, on this show because I'm a huge fan of their work and they've been doing such good work getting Congress and the White House or helping to push them to pay interns on the Hill and in the Capitol.

One more, just quick follow-up on this topic of AmeriCorps members as workers and part of the nonprofit workforce. The Ed. stipend, what is it now and, you know, how are you thinking about the public service debt relief? And how are folks using the Ed stipend, where is that headed?

MICHAEL: [00:32:32]

The Segal AmeriCorps Education Award...Eli Segal who was the first CEO of AmeriCorps, the Corporation for National and Community Service, who helped found the agency and who died far too soon. So the education award is named after him and also in gratitude for his family, like Phyllis Segal, who continues to work so hard for serving his legacy and doing so much great work on all sorts of issues. But the Segal Award is now set to match the Pell Grant which is important, so it will automatically rise, which is a little over \$7,000 right now. But what we know is the Pell Grant just has not kept pace with the cost of college, as the cost of going to school has gone so far out of control. When I talk to folks that were around at the time where AmeriCorps was founded, the hope was that the AmeriCorps education award could pay, for instance, state school tuition, and at that time there was a desire of maybe even, even in 1993 at being \$10,000. And there are a bunch of back and forth and compromises that had to be made. And so now we find ourselves 30 years later where the education award is helpful in many places and to many people, but it really hasn't kept pace. And so we're beginning to have conversations of what would that look like for it to grow or what would this look like to have other folks match the education award.

We have for instance something called Schools of National Service, where we have more than 300 schools that agree to provide some sort of recruitment and retention benefit for folks that do service. There are some that provide tuition matching, some that waive application fees and everything in between. We're looking at what we can do as a Federal government but also once again looking at partnerships, because the other thing that happened is it's become more competitive, you now can go work for Starbucks and get your education paid for and that wasn't the kind of conversation that you were having 30 years ago when AmeriCorps was created. So we're having to figure out how do you compete in not only a more expensive market, but where we have other people that are taking some of our talent because they need those resources to make a difference for them and their families.

RUSTY: [00:34:38]

Yeah, I hadn't even thought about that. Thank you for that and thank you for the work you're doing to make AmeriCorps a more equitable opportunity for all Americans. In preparing for this interview I learned that AmeriCorps is not only developing a workforce for nonprofits in a sense but also for the government as well. So can you just share briefly, how are you partnering with other Federal agencies to get AmeriCorps members serving through Public Service in the government?

MICHAEL: [00:35:04]

Thank you for that question, Rusty. What I love is **sometime in the past few years, we have figured out how to resolve this tension that has existed since AmeriCorps was created. Is AmeriCorps about serving the community or serving the AmeriCorps members? And what we've**

realized is we are not successful unless we're doing both. When you are doing your AmeriCorps service, are you getting the training, the curriculum, the credentialing that you need to be able to go and change the game for you and your family, to get that job that you need to go above and beyond? And so as I was mentioning earlier, we've seen that happening organically in the education field. And we see it happening, really in interesting ways in the climate field where we've got a lot of our AmeriCorps Climate Corps that are getting training on how to cut down trees or do invasive species mitigation or do trail work, that are then getting jobs working for state and local and Federal governments doing those sorts of things.

One of the really cool things that we saw after Hurricane Sandy, FEMA came to us and said: "Hey, we saw those AmeriCorps members that were so incredibly helpful after Hurricane Sandy, how do we get some of those?" And so we created a partnership 10 years ago with FEMA called FEMA Corps, where FEMA gets to deploy some of our AmeriCorps and Triple C teams which are now branded FEMA Corps teams. That's that residential leadership and training program where we give them a 15-passenger van and training and send them to respond to disasters across the country, and FEMA now gets to deploy some of those teams.

Now, what we found in the 10 years is that FEMA has hired 25% of our AmeriCorps FEMA Corps alums and this most recent graduating class, 70% of them were given offers. And so we figured, we need to double down on that. And so during the United We Stand Summit, we launched a new partnership with Peace Corps in the office of personnel management, where we are trying to figure out how do we make these paths more certain.

And another example of that is last year we launched something called Public Health AmeriCorps, it's a \$400 Million partnership where we're taking \$400 million in resources from CDC and we are finding more AmeriCorps members and deploying more AmeriCorps members to do work in public health fields. And then CDC is giving them the training that they need so that they end up staying in the public health fields. And when I meet with our new Public Health AmeriCorps members, they know what job they want right now. They know they want to be a CNA, they know they want to be a nurse, they know they want to be a doctor. Actually, when we launched a public health AmeriCorps in Milwaukee I met with a doctor who 10 years before that, was someone that was interested in medical school but wasn't sure. So he decided to become an AmeriCorps VISTA member at a public health clinic and he is now a doctor running the public health AmeriCorps expansion at that same clinic. And so we see that and we know that we can be this pipeline for the Federal government, for the nonprofit sector and even frankly for the private sector. We've got 600 employers of national service who love AmeriCorps members for all the reasons that nonprofits do. It is a great value proposition when you do your AmeriCorps service, it will not only change you for a year or two, but it can change your life.

RUSTY: [00:38:23]

There you go. That balance of serving the Corps members and serving the community. And actually, to what you said earlier, about how AmeriCorps members can amplify volunteerism, my co-AmeriCorps member Julie and I, yeah, we manage 15 to 30 student volunteers from our University as well as ourselves serving senior citizens in two neighborhoods. So when you said

that, I was like, oh that's what we were doing. And so, the agencies we worked with didn't have to even really worry about managing those volunteers.

MICHAEL: [00:38:58]

Yeah, when you're a small nonprofit and you're doing your budget for the year and you're choosing between having a development person to raise money for you, having a program person to run programs or volunteer manager. It's so often the volunteer manager position that falls off. And so, I'm so excited for the work that you did and what AmeriCorps members do across the country.

RUSTY:: [00:39:16]

Yeah, I mean, to change the subject, the FEMA Corps and the public health corps sound incredible and congratulations to you and AmeriCorps for getting those going. So, so important, and it sounds like a really powerful work. Although, I am a little afraid about the 15-passenger vans, that sounds very fun, but...

MICHAEL: [00:39:38]

Rusty, you've got to come visit one of our campuses! They have the like police-style courses with the traffic code, where we teach the young people how to do the maneuvers and drive those vans, and our team leaders can be older than 24. So, sometimes we get some older folks in there to provide a little trading.

RUSTY:: [00:39:55]

That's good. Are there any other projects or developments going on at AmeriCorps now or coming up that you want folks to know about?

MICHAEL: [00:40:04]

You know, there are three things that we're focusing on right now. One is impact. You know, how do we make sure that AmeriCorps is not just a thousand flowers blooming? And so we have a focus on evidence and I'm really proud that last year more than 60% of our AmeriCorps grantees had strong or moderate levels of impact, so we actually know the work that they're doing doesn't just look good, but it's actually making a real measurable, tangible impact on the lives of the people that it's serving. And so we want to make sure 20 to 30 years from now, when we look at this time, we can say AmeriCorps made this impact on these key local and national challenges. And to say that you've got to be deliberate about it.

The other thing is equity, which we talked about. How do we make sure that AmeriCorps reflects the rich diversity of the country and the communities that we serve so that AmeriCorps members don't just see themselves as being served, but having the wonderful opportunity and the privilege to serve as well? And so that we get more diverse grantees and we make sure that we are living these values of equity and diversity.

And the last thing that we haven't talked a lot about is this idea of unity and there is something about the power of service that cuts through the question of where are you from, what political

party are you a part of, you know, who is your clique, what is your clan? And there's something about service when you are mucking and gutting a house after a hurricane, when you are helping young students learn how to read, who folks had counted out, when you are out building those trails in the middle of the woods or fighting fires. There's something when you're serving together with people from different backgrounds it allows you to see each other's humanity. And so the Biden Administration has called on AmeriCorps to be a part of the lead of figuring out how do we use service to bring people together? We're going to train AmeriCorps members on bridging techniques, we're going to fund some pilots across the country and we are going to do more to make sure that we are bringing people together through service.

RUSTY: [00:42:00]

That's powerful as well: impact, equity and unity, love that. And how can folks who are listening learn more about King Day this year, the Martin Luther King Jr. Day of service and AmeriCorps.

MICHAEL: [00:42:14]

I'll say it again, anybody can be great because anybody can serve. And if you want to find out how to start a path to greatness, go to [AmeriCorps.gov](https://www.americorps.gov). You can use our fit finder tool to see if you could be an AmeriCorps member and keep in mind, you don't have to just be 18 to 24, AmeriCorps Seniors start at 55, and many of our AmeriCorps programs don't have any kind of age limit. So service is something for any age or stage in life and we, I actually found during this whole Great Resignation period we're in, a lot of people that have said, "You know what? I don't want to be a legal secretary anymore. I'm going to come in and work in the school and make a difference for young people." So you can find our fit finder to see if there's an AmeriCorps program that's right for you. You can find out how you can serve any day of the year or you can find out how you can serve on MLK Day of Service. So [AmeriCorps.gov](https://www.americorps.gov) has all of the tools and the resources for you.

RUSTY: [00:43:06]

Well, Michael Smith, CEO of AmeriCorps, thank you so, so much for your time today and for your leadership now and always. Really appreciate you for being here.

MICHAEL: [00:43:17]

Rusty Stahl, thanks for your service, for your service back in the way, way, way back in the 90s and for your ongoing service to the nonprofit sector and to children and families across the country.

RUSTY: [00:43:30]

Thank you sir, I appreciate it.

Thank you everybody for being with us for this special bonus episode with Michael Smith from AmeriCorps. If you found this episode beneficial, this is a great time to go to Apple Podcasts, find our show and give us a five star rating. Thank you in advance.

We will be back in early March 2023 with our next full season, Season 4, which will explore the 8 Practices of Talent Investing. In this new season we'll also update you on the Funding that Works Academy, our hub of unique online courses that teach the fundamentals of Talent-Investing and Talent Justice. As longtime listeners of this show will know, we are in the process of piloting the premier course of the Academy this winter, and in our new podcast season I'll update you about that process, what we're learning and when the courses will be publicly available to you.

If you have any feedback on ours Season 3, or this episode, or the podcast overall, if you've got guests ideas or if you think you might be a good fit as a guest on this show, please email me [rusty@fundthepeople.org](mailto:rusty@fundthepeople.org) and let me know, I'd appreciate your thoughts. So happy New Year, happy Martin Luther King Day and I'll speak with you again soon.

#### OUTRO:

Thanks for listening to the Fund The People podcast where we help you cook up nutritious and delicious alternatives to the nonprofit starvation cycle by investing in the nonprofit workforce. On behalf of myself, Rusty Stahl, our gracious guests and everyone who makes the show possible we hope you enjoyed the episode. You can find links to the resources that were mentioned, guest bios, show notes, and the audio for this episode by visiting [fundthepeople.org](http://fundthepeople.org) and clicking on Podcast. Thank you for driving change in our communities, our country and the world. Remember to keep your tank full, take care of yourself and take care of one another.