

ONWARD

2025 Annual Report



Despite all that Common Defense Education Fund has experienced since our founding in 2021, we knew 2025 was going to be a particularly tough year. Our senior leadership conducted extensive scenario planning in the summer of 2024, playing out the worst case scenarios facing our democracy, our climate, and our communities. It was a wrenching exercise that left us drained, but when the elections were over and those scenarios became a reality, we already had a strategic and tactical plan in place that allowed us to mobilize our staff, supporters, and members to begin opposing the worst of what we saw coming.

But no scenario planning could fully prepare us, individually or as an organization, for either the pace or the extremity of what we have weathered in the past 12 months. I personally fought my own battle with cancer in the midst of it, which so many of you supported me through and which, I am now grateful to say, I am on the other side of. Despite the grief, the terror, and the disbelief of all we faced, we have shown up and held strong. Common Defense Education Fund grew faster by every measure than we ever have before in our history, executing our largest and most successful campaigns to date, and reminding Americans that veterans stand on the side of decency, democracy, and justice, and will always refuse to let the promise of America be degraded by fascists.

We, as veterans, have had practice dealing with seemingly insurmountable odds, dire circumstances, and overwhelming challenges. We have seen dictatorships up close; we have accompanied citizens in authoritarian states to their first free and fair elections. We have fought and continue to fight for a country that we can both believe in and criticize. This freedom, as our forebears knew, is precious and fragile, and must be protected with everything we've got. No one in America is more qualified to lead the rallying cry of dissent than those who risked their lives defending it.

Everything you will read about in these pages was made possible because of two things — the generosity of our supporters, and the tenacity of our team. While we do not know what will come in 2026 or beyond, we know that with those two bolsters in place, we will not just hold our ground, but build something stronger, safer, and more just in its place. You cannot win a battle without believing something better lies on the other side.

In solidarity,
Jose Vasquez
Executive Director



A COMMUNITY OF VETERANS

ORGANIZING FOR ALL

OF OUR COMMUNITIES.



Common Defense Education Fund (CDEF) is the largest grassroots organization of military veterans and the only one that invests in its members' leadership through training, deep coalition work, and engagement in local and national grassroots advocacy campaigns, leveraging the credibility of their service. With key organizing hubs in Arizona, Georgia, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Texas, and a national membership of over 572,000 veterans, service members, military family members, and civilian supporters — including more than 13,000 highly engaged and mobilized veteran “Corps” members in every state — CDEF is dedicated to strengthening civic participation and our democracy, advancing environmental and racial justice, and promoting just foreign policy and immigrant rights.

Since our founding in 2021 with the hashtag #VetsVsHate, which went viral and began dispelling the myth that all veterans are conservative, we have played pivotal roles in Ending the Forever War in Afghanistan, fighting the Muslim ban, advocating for Afghan refugees, facilitating the enactment of the Inflation Reduction Act, and fighting to expanded voting rights.



DEFENDING OUR RIGHTS: VA NOT FOR SALE

CDEF has a proven track record of turning rapid response into lasting civic power. In March 2025, when a leaked memo exposed plans to lay off 80,000 VA employees, we mobilized **VA: Not for Sale** — a rapid response campaign that grew into a nationwide movement. Within months, we collected over 200 veteran stories, organized rallies across the country, secured 30+ earned media placements and op-eds, and reached over half a million people online. In May, more than 60 CD veteran members from 29 states traveled to Washington, D.C. to engage in bird-dogging and advocacy meetings with Senators, Representatives, and senior staff from both parties—including most members of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee and the Chair of the House Veterans Affairs Committee. After a month of sustained pressure, the administration reduced the layoffs to 30,000—clear evidence that our pressure works.

To deepen this work, we developed an innovative district lookup tool that allows users nationwide to see how cuts to the VA would affect both veteran and civilian care, especially in rural community hospitals that would bear the brunt of those cuts. The tool exposes how austerity policies exacerbate inequities between urban and rural regions and between veterans and civilians, underscoring how disinvestment disproportionately harms already under-resourced communities. It has become a cornerstone of organizing infrastructure, advancing civic education, amplifying storytelling, and sustaining member engagement by empowering users to share their experiences and contact their representatives.



— PROMOTING PEACE — NO MORE FOREVER WARS

Common Defense's longest running campaign, End the Forever War, continues with advocating for the repeal of two AUMFs (Authorizations of the Use of Military Force): first, an AUMF in 1991 that led to the Gulf War, and second, an AUMF in 2002 that led to the invasion of Iraq. This year, building on prior advocacy for issues related to Israel/Palestine, Afghanistan, and Ukraine, our efforts have emphasized ethical military conduct, accountability in defense leadership, and preventing the misuse of the military at home and abroad amid a changing political landscape.

We maintained partnerships and veteran-led voices on responsible foreign policy, including continued calls for just resolutions in ongoing global conflicts. For example, we participated in a civil society briefing sponsored by a new coalition of experts in human rights, civilian harm mitigation, drug policy, international law, and other fields, including Amnesty USA and International Crisis Group, who focus on preventing escalation with Venezuela and are hosted by Rep. Jim McGovern. We use briefing opportunities such as this to inform congressional staff about the legality of the strikes and their regional implications, as well as to provide the unique perspective of veterans, many of whom served in conflicts during the GWOT era.



NO
MORE
FOREVER
WARS

COMMON
DEFENSE

Due to changing U.S. commitments abroad under the new administration, we have prioritized diplomatic pathways and accountability in security assistance where engaged. For years, Common Defense has advocated for the Afghan Adjustment Act to expand resources for resettling an estimated 80,000 Afghan allies and their families. In light of this administration's crackdown on immigration, we continue to advocate for our Afghan allies and highlight their contributions. CDEF has provided a veteran perspective on responsible U.S. engagement abroad, including prior lobbying for continued humanitarian aid. In 2025, amid policy shifts and debates over defense priorities, we focused on broader military ethics, opposing potential war crimes in operations, and ensuring oversight of defense leadership decisions.

Centering Vets in the Fight for Our Futures: Veterans Power America



In March, CDEF launched Veterans Power America, our new climate program, to position the clean energy transition as a patriotic national mission with veterans leading the charge. VPA integrates workforce development and siting advocacy for renewable energy projects into a single, cohesive narrative that emphasizes job creation, community empowerment, and national security. Our VPA team grew with the hire of three new organizers, and we now have VPA organizing staff in Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, and Pennsylvania.

Over the year, our team led and contributed to efforts to approve two new clean energy projects in Arizona and two in Pennsylvania, and positioned the veteran voice on clean energy issues as part of our storytelling and media outreach tactics, highlighting the economic and environmental benefits of clean energy. Thanks, in part, to our efforts, Juniper Springs Solar+Storage and LightHorse Battery Energy Storage Project in Apache County, AZ, Black Moshannon Solar in Centre County, PA, and Union Solar in Erie County, PA were approved, adding a combined 1,117 megawatts of new clean energy.

Other activities undertaken by the VPA team included organizing a solar tour of the facilities at Penn State University, participating in protests at CERA Week in Houston, developing our signature “WTF Is a Megawatt?” training to increase members’ understanding of clean energy projects, demanding accountability for massive energy rate hikes, and more. We are building on our successes in 2025 by continuing to connect renewable energy to affordability through highlighting high utility costs and underemployment among veterans as points of leverage.

In November we officially released a report with the RAND Corporation, a multi-year collaboration funded by the Heinz Endowments, which shows that veterans are ideally positioned to lead the clean energy workforce economy.





“The data is clear: veterans have the skills to lead America’s clean energy future,” said Lakiesha Lloyd, US Army Veteran and Director of Veterans Power America. **“The clean energy industry gives veterans a new mission: powering America’s economy and strengthening our nation’s energy independence. At a time when veterans and their families across the country are feeling the squeeze from rising costs and shrinking opportunities, clean energy is a jobs plan, an economic driver, a security strategy, and a lifeline for communities nationwide.”**

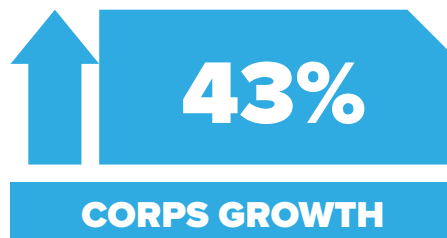


GROWING

OUR

BASE

In 2025, through intentional relationship-building with veterans, military families, and allied communities, Common Defense Education Fund expanded its base nationwide and experienced historic growth. Our overall membership network increased by 51%, reaching more than 572,000 members across the United States. At the same time, our highly engaged Corps membership grew from 9,678 to 13,848 members—an increase of 43% compared to 2024. This growth was driven by a deliberate emphasis on deep, personal engagement with members, and supported by community events, trainings, and organizing opportunities.



EXPANDING OUR REACH

To sustain engagement beyond election cycles, CDEF launched a pilot in North Carolina that explores whether mutual aid can serve as a pathway to long-term civic engagement, grassroots organizing, and leadership within our broader movement for a thriving democracy. Veterans from underrepresented communities—particularly women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ individuals—often face significant barriers when navigating the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) disability claims process. These inequities, combined with unmet basic needs, make civic engagement a distant priority for many. Our pilot combines direct education, peer support, and leadership development to help veterans access the benefits they’ve earned while building relational ties and organizing skills. Through regular workshops and 1:1 support, CDEF provides veterans with the tools and knowledge to successfully file disability claims, navigate the bureaucracy of the VA, and understand their rights, including new benefits like those under the PACT Act. The results of this pilot will inform our decision to scale, and hopefully surface broader insights on leveraging mutual aid and educational services to enhance long-term organizing outcomes.

Today, CDEF is also establishing regional organizing hubs near Fort Bragg and Camp Lejeune — our first attempt at engaging with active duty troops and their families. These hubs will anchor civic education, storytelling, and leadership development in demographically diverse, strategically significant military communities. Through base-area organizing and military civic messaging, we will equip transitioning service members, veterans, and military families with tools to engage in nonpartisan civic life and to reinforce our shared democratic values.



2026 Strategy and Objectives

In order to measure our progress toward our goals, CDEF employs an Objectives and Key Results (OKR) framework designed to set ambitious goals that inspire meaningful change, while recognizing that full completion of every objective is not always the intended outcome. By aiming high, we ensure our team is consistently pushing boundaries and innovating, while maximizing impact. Our OKRs measure what we can directly influence—the growth of our base and the organized power of our members—and allow us to track progress, not just outcomes. Across all programming, we collect data on engagement, retention, completion of high- and low-commitment actions, media impressions, and organizational resilience.

Leadership from Common Defense participated in an intensive strategic planning process throughout the summer and fall of 2025 that set the course for the next year of our work. This planning process has helped our organization to balance new programmatic priorities with the momentum built from the previous year.



2026 Objectives	2026 Key Results
<p>1. MOBILIZE VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES TO TAKE BOLD ACTION IN DEFENSE OF THE VA, OUR CLIMATE, AND OUR DEMOCRACY.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • KR1: 600 unique Corps members take 1,250 High-Commitment Actions (HCAs) that meaningfully advance our strategic campaigns. • KR2: 50,000 unique Associate Members take 150,000 digital Low-Commitment Actions (LCAs) across all strategic priorities, including major campaigns and rapid-response efforts.
<p>2. BUILD A POWERFUL, ORGANIZED GRASSROOTS FORCE OF VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES READY TO TAKE ACTION FOR THEIR COMMUNITIES AND COUNTRY.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • KR1: Grow our universe of self-identified veteran and military family Associate Members from 56,000 to 100,000. • KR2: Double our Associate Member 90-day engagement rate from ~50,000 to 100,000, defined as taking at least one action every 90 days. • KR3: Increase our Corps membership from 13,000 to 18,000, building a larger pool of members ready for relational follow-up and high-commitment action. • KR4: Increase our Corps 90-day active rate from 1,726 to 3,500, defined as taking at least one action or participating in one engagement touchpoint. • KR5: Empower 250 Cadre Leaders to complete one standardized Cadre Training and one defined Leadership Action (e.g., recruitment, hosting an event, or facilitating a training).
<p>3. EXPAND THE RESOURCES, REACH, AND POLITICAL INFLUENCE NEEDED TO MAKE COMMON DEFENSE THE NATIONAL GRASSROOTS HOME FOR VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • KR1: Raise \$10 million across our c3 and c4 to support our organizing, advocacy, and election programs. • KR2: Secure 500 pieces of earned or owned media coverage, including news articles, op-eds, and major podcasts, that explicitly mention Common Defense or our programs. • KR3: Persuade 20% of endorsed federal candidates to publicly adopt one or more new policy commitments from our platform that they did not previously support.