



# 2026 POLICY AGENDA

 **COMMON  
DEFENSE**  
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# DEFENDING DEMOCRACY.

# HONORING SERVICE.

# BUILDING PROSPERITY.

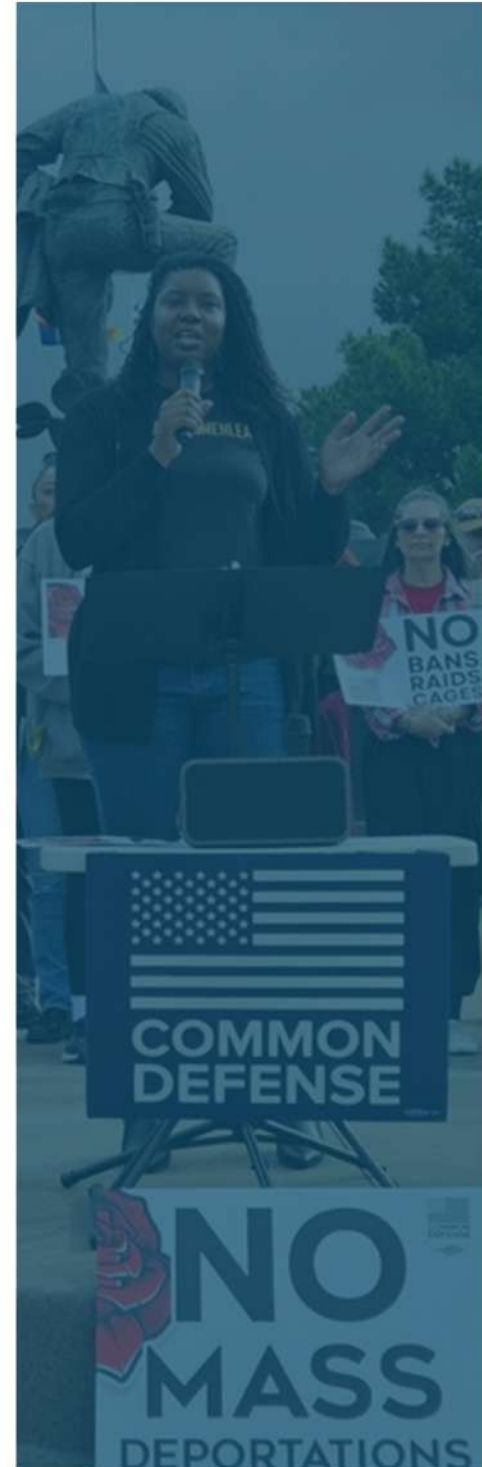
Common Defense is the largest grassroots membership organization of progressive U.S. military veterans and the only one that invests directly in the leadership of its members through training and deployment in grassroots campaigns that leverage the credibility of their service. We are a BIPOC-led organization with more than 500,000 members—including veterans, military families, and civilian supporters—with nearly 2,000 highly engaged veteran “Cadre” leaders organizing in communities across the country.

The moment facing our country today demands that leadership. The institutions that veterans swore to defend are under attack. At the same time, too many veterans and military families are struggling with rising costs, barriers to opportunity, and an economy that too often fails to reward service with stability. In a moment like this, the responsibility of defense does not end with military service. It requires citizens willing to stand up for the institutions that sustain our democracy. Common Defense didn’t ask for this moment, but is more necessary now than ever before.

For too long, veterans have too often been treated as a constituency outside the progressive movement, utilized as props for agendas. Common Defense is changing that by uplifting the voices of working-class veterans and equipping them to lead in the fight for a more just and democratic society.

Our members know what is at stake because they have seen firsthand what happens when democratic institutions erode and when governments fail to serve the people they represent. That experience shapes both our values and our priorities. Veterans bring unique credibility to the fight for democracy at home, and we believe that defending democratic institutions must go hand-in-hand with honoring the commitments our nation has made to those who served and building an economy that works for working families.

This legislative agenda outlines the major policy priorities our members are organizing around in the 119th Congress. It reflects the demands of our membership and the communities they serve. Across these priorities—defending democracy, honoring service, and building broad-based prosperity—we seek policies that strengthen democratic institutions, protect and expand the benefits veterans earned, and ensure that those who served our country have the opportunity to build stable and dignified lives after service.



# DEFENDING DEMOCRACY

Veterans swear an oath not to a political party or a president, but to the Constitution of the United States. Today, that oath is being tested. The Trump administration has expanded executive power, sidelined congressional oversight, and increasingly used national security authorities in ways that strain the constitutional balance generations of Americans fought to protect.

Military force has been employed abroad without clear authorization from Congress, relying on outdated legal authorities that deny the American people a full and open debate about the costs and consequences of war. Service members continue to be placed in harm's way under ambiguous mandates, weakening democratic accountability over decisions of war and peace.

At home, the lines between military and civilian governance have begun to blur. The mobilization of National Guard forces and the expansion of federal enforcement powers in civilian settings raise serious concerns about the role of military force within the United States. The armed forces exist to defend the nation from external threats—not to be used to police domestic political activity or intimidate civilian communities. Preserving that boundary is essential to maintaining public trust and democratic integrity.

Defending democracy requires restoring constitutional checks and balances, reaffirming Congress's authority over war, safeguarding civil liberties, and protecting the right of every American to participate fully in civic life. In this moment, veterans are stepping forward once again, to lead in defense of the democratic principles they swore to uphold.



## END FOREVER WAR

### **The United States must restore democratic accountability over decisions of war and peace.**

In the wake of the combat operations in Iran that are actively reshaping the Middle East, too many veterans are left with a familiar and uneasy feeling. That once again, the lessons paid for in blood and sacrifice were not enough to ensure restraint.

We have seen this pattern before: military force deployed without clear authorization, without a defined objective, and without a full accounting to the American people.

Each time, it places service members in harm's way while weakening the constitutional framework meant to guide decisions of war.

For those who have served, this moment is not abstract. It raises a harder question about whether the sacrifices of the past have meaning if they do not lead to greater prudence in the future.

Watching the country move toward the same dangerous mistakes risks eroding trust in the very institutions veterans swore to defend.

Congress has a responsibility to break that cycle. Restoring its constitutional authority over war is not just a procedural matter: it is essential to ending the pattern of endless and unauthorized conflict and ensuring it is not repeated.

### **Did You Know:**

- The U.S. carried out roughly 573 air and drone strikes between January 2025 and early January 2026, compared with 494 strikes during the entire four-year Biden presidency.
- Combat operations in Iran cost \$30 billion through the end of March 2026 — roughly equivalent to the annual cost of the ACA subsidies cut under the One Big Beautiful Bill Act.

### **What Congress Must Do:**

- Restore congressional authority over war powers.
- Vote against supplemental spending packages for illegal wars.
- Pass the [Block the Bombs Act](#) to provide for a limitation on the transfer of defense articles and defense services to Israel.

## NO WAR ON OUR STREETS

**The military exists to defend the nation from external threats, not to be used as a tool of domestic political control. Today, that line is being eroded.**

The growing militarization of local police, combined with the expansion of federal enforcement operations, has blurred the boundary between civilian governance and the use of force. Increasingly, communities are facing tactics, equipment, and postures that resemble military operations rather than accountable law enforcement.

For many veterans, this moment is deeply unsettling. We know what it means when force is used without clear limits or accountability. The consequences are not abstract.

Americans have been killed in the streets, including Alex Pretti, a veteran and nurse, and Renée Good, a mother, both shot by federal agents during enforcement actions in Minnesota. These deaths underscore the real and irreversible cost when restraint breaks down and oversight fails.

Defending democracy requires maintaining a clear separation between military power and civilian life, reforming federal enforcement practices, and ensuring that no community is treated as a battlefield.

### Did You Know:

- The federal government has transferred billions in military equipment to local police through programs like the 1033 Program, including armored vehicles and tactical gear.
- U.S. Customs and Border Protection has expanded authority up to 100 miles from any border, placing nearly two-thirds of Americans within its enforcement zone.

### What Congress Must Do:

- Pass the National Guard Proper Use Act to prohibit the use of soldiers for unconstitutional immigration enforcement.
- Pass the Military in Law Enforcement Accountability Act to prohibit non-emergency military support to civilian law enforcement.
- Pass the Stop Militarizing Law Enforcement Act to restrict DOD from transferring certain surplus military property to federal, state, or local law enforcement agencies.

## STOP ABUSES BY ICE

**Immigration enforcement should never come at the expense of basic rights, due process, or the nation's commitment to those who served.**

In 2025, those principles were systematically dismantled through indiscriminate abductions carried out at an industrial scale. Expanded enforcement authorities and weakened oversight, have led to the detention and deportation of countless law-abiding green card holders and noncitizens — including veterans and military family members.

These actions are not isolated. They reflect a broader shift toward unchecked federal enforcement power, where agencies operate with limited transparency and insufficient accountability. When constitutional protections are eroded in one area, they are weakened for everyone.

For veterans, this moment is especially stark. Service was supposed to be a pathway to belonging, not a vulnerability. Allowing those who served to be detained or deported undermines the credibility of that promise and the values it represents.

Reform is urgently needed to restore due process, rein in enforcement authorities, and ensure that constitutional protections are upheld for everyone in the United States.

### Did You Know:

- As of April 2026, 47 people have died in ICE custody during President Trump's second term, marking the deadliest 15-month period in the agency's history.
- In April 2025, ICE replaced prior guidance that treated military service as a mitigating factor, clearing the way for removal proceedings against noncitizen veterans and their family members.

### What Congress Must Do:

- Pass the Veterans Service Recognition Act to create an expedited process for deported veterans to return to the United States and restore their status.
- Condition DHS funding on ending interior enforcement abuses, including racial profiling, warrantless arrests, and operations outside authorized boundaries.
- Launch a full congressional investigation into DHS and ICE domestic enforcement practices, including their scope, tactics, and human impact.

# HONORING SERVICE

To serve in the United States military is to make a binding commitment to the nation. In return, the nation makes a promise: that those who serve will be cared for, supported, and treated with dignity when their service ends. Honoring service means upholding that promise—not just in words, but through strong public institutions, fair benefits, and protections against exploitation.

Today, that commitment is being tested. Efforts to privatize or weaken the Department of Veterans Affairs threaten the quality and accessibility of care that veterans rely on. The VA is not just another healthcare provider; it is a specialized, veteran-centered system built to meet the unique needs of those who have served. Undermining it risks breaking faith with millions of veterans.

At the same time, too many veterans are being targeted by predatory actors seeking to profit off the benefits they have earned. From claims processing schemes to exploitative financial practices, these abuses take advantage of veterans navigating complex systems at vulnerable moments. Honoring service requires not only protecting benefits, but ensuring veterans are shielded from those who would exploit them.

Veterans also deserve access to comprehensive, high-quality healthcare—including reproductive care—without political interference. The nation's obligation to those who served must include the full spectrum of medical services necessary for their health and well-being.

Honoring service means strengthening the institutions that serve veterans, safeguarding the benefits they have earned, and ensuring that no veteran is left to navigate these challenges alone. It is a commitment to treat service not as a talking point, but as a promise kept.



## VA NOT FOR SALE

### **The Department of Veterans Affairs is a public institution built to serve those who served.**

It provides specialized, veteran-centered care that cannot be replicated in the private sector. Today, that system is under growing strain. Staffing shortages, underinvestment, and policies that shift care into the private sector are weakening the VA's ability to deliver timely, high quality care.

These challenges are not accidental. Under Secretary Doug Collins, in coordination with the Department of Government Efficiency, these changes have been advanced in ways that systematically reduce the capacity of the VA and expand reliance on private sector providers. Taken together, these actions create the conditions used to justify further privatization, putting at risk the specialized, veteran centered care that the VA was built to provide.

When care is outsourced without strong standards or oversight, veterans are pushed into fragmented systems that are not equipped to understand service-related conditions or provide the continuity of care they need. This undermines both health outcomes and trust in the system.

Honoring service means strengthening the VA, not dismantling it. The nation's obligation to veterans must be met through a fully funded, fully staffed, and fully public system that delivers the care veterans were promised and have earned.

### **Did You Know:**

- Despite data showing VA delivering equal or better outcomes, more than one-third of VA care is sent out to private sector providers.
- VA reported losses of 3,000 RNs in 2025.
- Hundreds of VA facilities report mental health wait times exceeding recommended standards, highlighting the impact of staffing shortages on timely care.

### **What Congress Must Do:**

- Restore collective bargaining by passing the [Protect America's Workforce Act](#).
- Pass the [LEAD Act of 2026](#) to rebuild trust within the VA workforce by strengthening accountability and protecting whistleblowers.
- Pass the [HONOR Act of 2026](#) to require private-sector providers to meet the same quality and training standards as VA clinicians.

## PROTECT REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

**The VA has long played a critical role in providing comprehensive, veteran-centered healthcare, including reproductive services for women veterans.**

In the wake of the Dobbs decision, which eliminated federal protections for reproductive rights, access to care has become increasingly uneven across the country, making the VA's role more important than ever.

That role has come under direct challenge. In 2025, Secretary Doug Collins moved to rescind the VA's 2022 reproductive health rule, which allows abortion care and counseling in limited circumstances. This rollback has left women veterans without reliable access to essential services, particularly in states where care is already limited or unavailable. Women veterans are one of the fastest-growing populations within the VA, and their healthcare needs must be met with consistency and respect.

Reproductive care is not separate from overall health. It is a core component of it. Ensuring access within the VA system protects veterans from political interference, geographic disparities, and gaps in private coverage. Honoring service means guaranteeing that all veterans can access the full spectrum of care they need, regardless of where they live.

### Did You Know:

- Nearly half of all women veterans live in states with abortion restrictions, increasing reliance on the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs for consistent access to care.
- Women veterans are one of the fastest-growing populations within the VA.

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### What Congress Must Do:

- Codify the VA's 2022 reproductive health rule to guarantee access to abortion care and counseling for veterans.

## POLICE VA CLAIM SHARKS

**“If you want to crack down on exploitation, start with the real predators—the claim sharks who charge illegal fees, falsify paperwork, and profit from veterans’ confusion and pain.”**

– Ryan Gallucci, VFW

Ongoing scrutiny from the Trump administration and in the press has focused on veterans allegedly “defrauding” the VA to receive disability benefits. But the real exploitation is being driven by bad actors known as “claims sharks.” These unaccredited actors often misrepresent their services, take advantage of veterans, and extract significant portions of benefits veterans earned through their service. Veterans can receive this same assistance for free through accredited VSOs, making these practices not only predatory but unnecessary.

Claims sharks reflect gaps in oversight and enforcement that leave veterans vulnerable throughout the claims process. Without stronger protections, more veterans will be exploited when seeking the benefits they deserve. Honoring service means ensuring that veterans are not treated as profit opportunities. Congress must strengthen enforcement against unaccredited actors, expand access to legitimate assistance, and protect veterans from financial exploitation tied to their earned benefits.

### Did You Know:

- In 2021, Trajector Inc. reported millions in revenue and a valuation exceeding \$100 million—offering a glimpse into a fast-growing industry of unaccredited firms now charging veterans thousands of dollars for claims assistance that is legally supposed to be free.

### What Congress Must Do:

- Pass the Guard VA Benefits Act to reinstate criminal penalties on firms that charge unauthorized fees for preparing VA disability claims.

## END THE DISABLED VETERAN TAX

**Under current law, combat injured veterans are forced to give up retirement pay they earned in order to receive disability compensation they are owed.**

Major Richard Star was an Army combat engineer who served in Iraq and Afghanistan before being medically retired due to combat-related injuries. Following his retirement, he was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer linked to toxic exposure during his service. Like tens of thousands of combat-injured veterans, he was denied full retirement pay because of a policy that forces wounded service members to forfeit earned benefits. There is no justification for this policy. These are not overlapping benefits. One reflects service, while the other reflects sacrifice.

At a time when Congress is willing to commit hundreds of billions of dollars to military operations abroad, it continues to deny full benefits to the very service members who have already paid the price of war. That contradiction is more than a policy mistake. It is a refusal to honor service.

Ending this injustice is a matter of fairness, but also of credibility. The nation cannot claim to support its troops while withholding the benefits they have earned. Honoring service means ensuring that no veteran is forced to sacrifice their retirement because they were wounded in combat.

### Did You Know:

- The Major Richard Star Act would cost about \$13 billion — roughly equivalent to one week of U.S. combat operations in the opening phase of the Iran war in March 2026.

### What Congress Must Do:

- Pass the Major Richard Star Act to restore full concurrent receipt of military retirement pay and disability compensation for combat-injured veterans.

# BUILDING PROSPERITY

Service to the nation should be met with the opportunity to build a stable and dignified life. Yet for too many veterans and military families, that promise remains out of reach. Rising costs, barriers to opportunity, and an economy that too often fails to reward work have left many struggling to achieve the security they were told their service would help protect.

This challenge is not separate from the broader choices our country makes. For decades, the United States has invested heavily in military power while underinvesting in the economic foundations that sustain strong communities. The result is an economy that prioritizes short-term growth over long-term stability, leaving working families—including those who served—more vulnerable to economic shocks and less able to build lasting security.

At the same time, the transition to a clean energy economy presents a generational opportunity. Done right, it can create good-paying jobs, strengthen domestic industry, and reduce the instability that comes from dependence on fossil fuels. Veterans, with their skills, leadership, and commitment to service, are uniquely positioned to help lead this transition.

Building prosperity requires a shift in national priorities. It means investing in an economy that works for working people, strengthening pathways to stable employment, and ensuring that those who served have access to the opportunities they earned. Even in a moment focused on defending our democracy, we must not lose sight of the future we are working to build.



## VETERANS POWER AMERICA

**Veterans have a critical role to play in building a sustainable economy that creates jobs, strengthens communities, and addresses the national energy crisis.**

Investments in clean energy and infrastructure can create economic opportunity while reducing the instability and conflict driven by fossil fuel dependence.

Veterans Power America is predicated on a simple truth: the skills developed in military service directly translate to the industries shaping America's future. This is not just an economic opportunity. It is a national security imperative. A clean energy transition strengthens domestic resilience, reduces reliance on unstable global energy markets, and positions the United States to lead in emerging industries. At the same time, it creates clear pathways for veterans to move into stable, high quality careers after service.

Meeting this challenge means organizing veterans at every level, federal, state, and local, to support renewable energy development and workforce pathways. Policymakers must recognize veterans as a critical workforce for the clean energy transition and ensure that federal and state programs create clear, accessible pathways into these careers.

### Did You Know:

- According to a report commissioned by Common Defense by the RAND Epstein Family Veteran Policy Research Institute & RAND Lowy Family Middle-Class Pathways Center, they found that 55 Military Occupational Specialties (MOS) have skills that are transferable to the renewable energy sector.

### What Congress Must Do:

- Pass the [Energy Bills Relief Act](#) to lower household energy costs by accelerating clean energy deployment and expand access to cost-saving technologies.
- Pass the [Veterans Energy Transition \(VET\) Act](#) to expand DoD-employer partnerships that place veterans in clean energy careers.







Common Defense is a grassroots, veteran-led organization that was founded in 2016. We empower veterans to stand up for our communities against the rising tide of racism, hate, and violence, to organize against the entrenched powers that have rigged our economy, and to champion an equitable and representative democracy, where “liberty and justice” truly is for all.

For too long, politicians from both political parties have attempted to use veterans as unwilling political props, and Common Defense serves as a home for veterans to organize and speak for themselves and support the candidates who truly share our values.

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