The Fund's History

Semper Fi & America's Fund

Our story began in the spring of 2003. Just back from Operation Iraqi Freedom, the first wave of wounded Marines and Sailors landed at Camp Pendleton, California. Karen Guenther, a registered nurse and spouse of an active duty Marine, saw firsthand the challenges faced by wounded Marines and Sailors as they returned from Iraq. She, along with a determined group of military spouses (Annette Conway, Sondria Saylor, Helen Toolan, and Karen Kelly) began to organize welcome home activities at the hospital, arranged travel for family members who couldn't afford airfare, provided a specialized van for a quadriplegic Marine through the generosity of donors (like retired Marine Colonel Jack Kelly), and assembled and distributed care bags filled with toiletries and phone cards. Still, the injured continued to arrive.

Realizing that a growing number of families across the Nation were facing similar situations, Karen brought together a dynamic team to expand the initial efforts into a nationwide nonprofit so that wounded, ill, and injured service members and their families would never be alone or forgotten. In May of 2004, Dawn Olson, Wendy Lethin, and Sarah Dalke came on board to help take this dream to incorporation. Soon Joanna Woblewski, Lyndsie Hesner, Rene Bardorf, and Liz Quist joined them. The mission was clear: to provide combat wounded, critically ill, and catastrophically injured service members with immediate financial assistance and quality of life solutions to lift the burdens of their new reality, so that each family could focus on their loved one's recovery. The Fund's first official donation came from the Lighthouse Christian Church in Oceanside, California, and by the end of the first year, $5 million had been raised. The group's first official headquarters? Karen's kitchen table.

Thousands of lives and families would be changed for the better over the years that followed as Semper Fi Fund's efforts and reputation grew. Service members and donors alike knew that The Fund had made a commitment to support service members not just at the time of injury or illness, but as long as needed, often lasting a lifetime. With administration and fundraising costs kept to exceptionally low, averaging just 8% since inception, The Fund is able to commit to giving the majority of every dollar to those who truly need it.

With a desire to expand its efforts beyond Marines and Sailors, Semper Fi Fund announced in March 2012 the creating of America's Fund: a self-funded program of the organization designed to direct urgently needed resources and financial support to combat wounded, critically ill, and catastrophically injured members in all branches of the U.S. Armed Forces and their families. In 2020, The Fund was officially renamed to "Semper Fi & America's Fund."

As of November 2026, Semper Fi & America's Fund has assisted 45,000 service members, veterans, and military families. The Fund's committed volunteers and passionate staff tirelessly work through a unique care model that provides lifetime support to our wounded, ill, and injured across the Nation and overseas.

Now in its 22nd year, Semper Fi & America's Fund's mission has greatly expanded from its humble beginnings around Karen's kitchen table. The Fund is dedicated to providing unparalleled care to our Nation's Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, Space Force, and Coast Guard service members, veterans, and military families to best serve those who preserve our freedom.

OUR MISSION IS CRITICAL.
OUR DUTY IS CLEAR.